

Bowdoin College

## Bowdoin Digital Commons

---

Honors Projects

Student Scholarship and Creative Work

---

2018

### Seize the Memes: Community, Personal Expression, and Everyday Feminist Politics Through Instagram Memes

Tessa Westfall

*Bowdoin College*, [tessacwestfall@gmail.com](mailto:tessacwestfall@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/honorsprojects>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Westfall, Tessa, "Seize the Memes: Community, Personal Expression, and Everyday Feminist Politics Through Instagram Memes" (2018). *Honors Projects*. 96.

<https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/honorsprojects/96>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship and Creative Work at Bowdoin Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of Bowdoin Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [mdoyle@bowdoin.edu](mailto:mdoyle@bowdoin.edu).

Seize the Memes:  
Community, Personal Expression, and Everyday Feminist Politics  
Through Instagram Memes

An Honors Project for the Program of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies  
By Tessa Westfall

Bowdoin College, 2018  
©2018 Tessa Westfall

## ***TABLE OF CONTENTS***

<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	iii
<b>Chapter One</b> <i>Introduction</i> .....	1
<b>Chapter Two</b> <i>Instagram Meme As Feminist Art Object</i> .....	31
<b>Chapter Three</b> <i>Memes As Community Building Sites</i> .....	55
<b>Chapter Four</b> <i>The Political Potential Of Memes: Everyday Feminist Critiques of Patriarchy</i> .....	73
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	94

## *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

To my incredible advisor, Professor Theo Greene: thank you for so beautifully illustrating that critiquing a work means that you care about it. Your intellectual generosity, your patience, and your belief in me have meant the world.

To my interlocutors: thank you for your time and for trusting me with your stories.

To Daisy Wislar and Elena Gleed: thank you for getting it.

To Carly Berlin and Jenny Ibsen: thank you for making home home.

To Sophie Bridges: thank you for sometimes being my surrogate frontal lobe.

To Jono Gruber: thank you for so often coming to the rescue.

To my Mom, Dad, and brother: thank you for never wavering.

And one more time, to Jenny Ibsen and Jono Gruber:

An extra special thank you for your continued support, protection, and close-read edits at the eleventh hour of this project. I may have been able to finish this alone, but because of you two I did not need to, and that was such an incredible gift.



## CHAPTER ONE *INTRODUCTION*

### **The Paradox of Political Memes**

Sometime in the fall of 2016, I started looking at a different part of Instagram than I ever had before. I had stumbled upon what I later called Sad Girl Memes, and then Feminist Memes, and then Political Memes, and then Niche Memes, and then just simply The Content. I've settled on some combination of "Femme Niche Emotional Intersectional Political/Feminist Memes." Memes are images that people make by combining original text with existing images. They can then be shared easily across Internet platforms, taking on significance in infinite flavors. This specific kind of meme, this intersectional feminist meme varietal, stopped me in my tracks. Let me take you into the moment of coming across a meme from one of my favorite artists on Instagram, and perhaps you'll see what I mean:

I'm skimming through my Instagram home feed, flitting through photos of my roommate's perfectly poached eggs, a new Kardashian lipstick launch, my ex-BFF from middle school's sorority formal. Amidst my gentle scroll, I happen upon a post by one of the meme artists I follow, @fiona\_apple\_butter. (Figure 1.1) The image is an artist's rendering of the children's story, *Pinocchio*. In the foreground of the picture, we see Pinocchio at his peak long nose status, looking surprised and alarmed. Behind him stands an equally uncanny woman, transfixed by Pinocchio's nose—she has one hand on her heart and the other in the air in a show of disbelief. The animation evokes the same feeling in me that I experienced at age seven, when being actively traumatized by the live action *Pinocchio* film. The faces in the image are just a little bit off—not quite realistic, but not comfortably in the realm of the fantastic. The text included in the meme itself, sitting just above the Pinocchio picture, reads,

“TFW<sup>1</sup> your dexterity in Social Justice Speak comes from 4 years at an elite and expensive liberal arts college.” I pause for a moment on this post. Encapsulated in this one image is a feeling that I myself have experienced many times. Here is this deeply political tension: I strive to be an advocate for social justice causes, and to discuss and live by my progressive values at all times. Simultaneously, I feel a sense of fraudulence because my education—and therein, my very ability to speak

with confidence on these issues—is a privilege that is completely inaccessible to most. I have a quick chuckle, marveling that this unnerving rendering of Pinocchio is so effective at capturing this complex feeling. Then I keep scrolling.

Later on, in an interview with me, the artist who made this *Pinocchio* meme said, “I’ve



Figure 1.1: Meme from @fiona\_apple\_butter.

realized that memes themselves aren't a super good format for being political.”<sup>2</sup> Until I spoke with her, I viewed @fiona\_apple\_butter as a distinctly political online presence. However, in our conversation, she actively rejected the term “political” in describing her memes. She continued, “I don't see the work as political so much as there's a subversive social structure, and a subversive power assertion, that happens through the creation and exchange of

<sup>1</sup> “that feeling when”

<sup>2</sup> Westfall, Interview with @fiona\_apple\_butter.

memes within this sort of queer feminist community.” @fiona\_apple\_butter’s words struck me as deeply contradictory, but her reticence did not exist in isolation.

I conducted interviews with memers—people who make memes—in researching this project. To my great surprise, @fiona\_apple\_butter’s statement, her rejection of “politics,” resonated across every memer I interviewed. This certainly did not come from a lack of conviction or values—the people with whom I spoke had real opinions about all manner of contemporary issues, both unique to their lives and on a more systemic level. They simply did not see their memes as a continuation of any sort of political identity. Each memer communicated a different reason why they did not believe their content to be political. Even though they consider themselves a political person, @queerprayingmantis said of their memes, “I would just consider them commentary, honestly.” @bunnymemes described a process of scaling back what she viewed as political content on her account because of negative feedback. She told me, “I used to be a lot more political, until I got a lot more followers, and I realized that I was just getting hate messages every single day. I couldn’t emotionally process that. So I’m political when I feel as though I need to speak about something that’s happened.” Many of my interlocutors described the memes as a way of negotiating mental health struggles. “Memes are a coping thing, but a healthy coping thing,” @thatanxiouswitch told me. Overwhelmingly, the thread that followed throughout every interview can be boiled down to something @kinayamemes said to me: “I’ve always just seen it as self-expression.” Herein lies the paradox that has come to guide this entire project: these memes can easily be read as explicitly political objects, but their creators actively reject the designation of political.

Feminist theory tells us that the personal is political. Memers' descriptions of their works and practices illuminate a kind of feminist infrastructure, wherein power is questioned and subverted. It is a curiosity that memers do not identify their works as political—it implies an understood differentiation between a progressive, feminist identity (which memers do claim) and a political identity (which they verbally reject). Memers say that their memes are not political, yet the memes themselves draw on symbols, messages, and images that enable their legibility to their audiences as political. Equally, because memes are embedded in the sociopolitical and historical contexts in which they were created, alternate meanings arise that place memes in conversation with political and social movements, such as #MeToo or Time's Up. In this paper, I do not make this distinction between feminism and politics; I structure my argument using the critical feminist notion that the two are inextricably linked. With this framework in place, I argue that memes are imbued with political potential.

In addition to feminist theory's notion that the personal and political are inextricably linked, the concept of everyday politics is useful in creating a working explanation of how memes operate as politics. Tim Highfield explains, "Everyday politics, as described by Boyte (2005), is populist and civic: of the people, not of governments or campaigns. Politics then is not just formal, as shaped and discussed by established political actors and the mainstream media, but highly informal."<sup>3</sup> This definition allows us to step outside of an exclusive, establishment political sphere. This project is about memes and their democratic power—a populist, civic approach to politics fits well here. Everyday politics is an incredibly useful framework for thinking about the politicized nature of memes, particularly when the creators do not personally view their work as political. Highfield continues in discussing who

---

<sup>3</sup> Highfield, *Social Media and Everyday Politics*. P. 7.

participates in everyday politics: “Everyday political talk features occasional contributions by individuals who are loosely connected (if at all), but who have their own personal interests, perspectives and issues of importance.”<sup>4</sup> This notion of a politics that is flexible, unstructured, and intermittent, again, fits quite well with the expressed political actions of the memers I spoke to for this project. Highfield’s exploration of the Internet as a key discursive space, the way marginalized people interact therein, and everyday politics allows for a clear understanding of what sort of world these memes are released into.

An online mobilization of the contemporary feminist movement adds an additional layer to Highfield’s articulation of a flexible politics. Allison Dahl Crossley explains that following the misogyny-fueled Isla Vista massacre of 2014, women online steered the conversation around gender inequality using the hashtag #YesAllWomen. This was a widely publicized, articulated iteration of feminist politics. Crossley makes it clear that, contrary to popular belief, this was not an out-of-the-blue occurrence of politics in which feminism suddenly existed where it had not before. She writes, “It is the result of mobilizing grievances, preexisting social ties, a solidarity with other participants, spurious events, and a context that is, to some degree, amenable to movement organizing.”<sup>5</sup> These acts of everyday feminism may go unrecognized in their political value, even by the people performing them. The memes and memers profiled in this project perform each of the functions laid out by Crossley, and they operate within a political landscape in which gender equality is in the public imagination. The frameworks provided by everyday politics and online feminisms allow for a critical feminist reading of the practices of memers themselves. With this theory, we can understand these memers to be performing feminist, political actions in their aesthetic

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Crossley, *Finding Feminism*. Pp. 2-3.

communicative styles and their coalition building aspirations toward their intended audience.

Beyond a feminist reading of their creators, memes have additional sources of potential political valence. They are sites where art, community building, and contemporary issues coalesce. Once posted, memes serve many functions. They become inspiring feminist objects, sites of synthesis of larger bodies of theory, and methods of furthering social justice in the world. Creators provide enough politically relevant content in their memes that an audience can coopt memes as political once they enter the public space of Instagram. Niche memes are important in their ability to illuminate this relationship between producer and receiver, alongside the power of the Internet as a complex relational space with constructive power of its own. This project is a celebration of memes in their multifaceted power, and will use memes themselves throughout as a method of grounding analysis.

Memes are chronically understudied as real sites of inquiry. Their irreverence and ephemerality makes them easy targets for hegemonic academic unfriendliness. In her scholarship on memes, Limor Shifman draws attention to the lack of seriousness with which academia views memes. She writes, “This book is a first step in bridging the yawning gap between (skeptical) academic and (enthusiastic) popular discourse about memes.”<sup>6</sup> She also engages the importance of cutting through the academic skepticism and researching memes anyway: “We need to take Internet memes seriously. The fledgling field of research devoted to this understanding has already demonstrated that Internet memes may help us decipher contemporary political, cultural, and social processes.”<sup>7</sup> Through this project, I endeavor to contribute to the scholarship on memes. One of the many arenas in which meme research falls short is in gendered critique and exploration. Through this project, I hope to illuminate

---

<sup>6</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*. P. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

and the importance of identity-centric personal memes made by women and gender nonbinary femmes.

### **What are Memes?**

Memes are static pictures that people post online which combine recognizable imagery from pop culture and the poster's own added text. "Meme" is not a word for one singular image, but rather, the objects that are produced from this greater phenomenon of people on the Internet doctoring photos and adding their own words. They can look infinite different ways, and be made to communicate any message. The images in memes can be mined from any possible pop culture space: a funny picture of an animal, a recognizable screenshot from film or television, a paparazzi photo of a celebrity, perhaps even a selfie of the artist themselves. With that image, meme makers, or memers, infuse their own meaning through manipulation—they add text or images, doctor the photo itself, or splice it within a totally new context.

In this moment, I would like to make a meme to communicate all my angst about writing this project. I could mine a photo from any simple Google search—pick a photo of a sleepy puppy, or a picture of Lisa Simpson playing her sax, or Britney Spears in 2007. To simplify things, I'll use a photo of myself working in the library. I want to add some additional text and shapes, so I open the photo in Preview and do some simple editing. Next, I drag the photo into my Notes application, and add the following text above it:

tfw<sup>8</sup> u have an honors thesis 2 write & it makes u wonder why u can't just be a lil caterpillar who stays in her cocoon 4ever but then u remember that the whole point of the cocoon is that eventually u do have 2 leave & ur better when u emerge so u wrap urself in a blanket scarf of encouragement and try 2 relish the process

Then, I unify the text and the image into one single file through taking a screenshot of the whole thing, and upload it to Instagram. Though this feels like a long series of steps, the whole process takes less than five minutes. Now I can add a simple color filter or adjust the visuals of the image with more finesse (things like Brightness, Contrast, Saturation, and so on). Because I've already

edited the meme on Preview,

I'll leave it without a filter.

Next, I move on to captioning and geographically tagging my image. When I geotag my post, it adds my meme to a separate feed of all the other images tagged at that location.

Caption: “#GSWS4life

#bowdoin” Geotag:

Hawthorne-Longfellow

Library. And, “Share.” Voila!

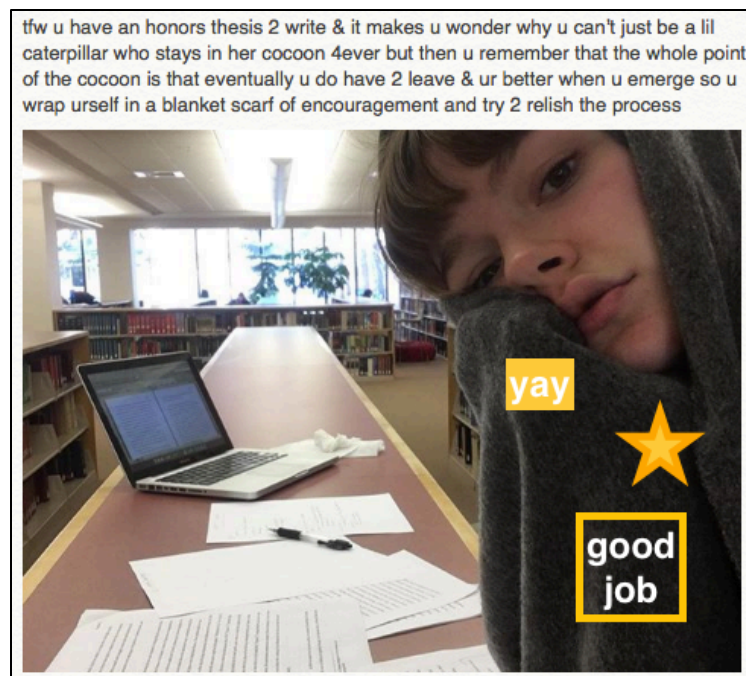


Figure 1.2: Meme by the author.

<sup>8</sup> “that feeling when”



My meme is out in the world (Figure 1.2). Now, any prospective student who might search the Bowdoin Library geotag or the hashtags “GSWS4life” or “bowdoin” can see my gem of a meme. Hopefully, they think it’s funny, and a new Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies major is created.

Though this project focuses on the ones shared on Instagram, memes surface on every platform of the Internet. In their wide-reaching virtual scope, memes can be made to serve any purpose at all. There are purely silly ones, something like lolcats. These memes show pictures of cats doing goofy things and have white text captions that emphasize how cute the whole situation is (Figure 1.3). Memes can evolve rapidly in their meaning. Pepe the Frog began as an innocuous cartoon frog meme used to talk about myriad awkward social situations (Figure 1.4). Now, the symbol exists exclusively as a kind of mascot for the alt-right, neo-Nazi, and white nationalist movements in the United States and abroad. A large swath of memes falls under the umbrella of “relatable memes.” These use the combination of an image and text to illustrate a common experience. Typically, they are played for comedic value. An example of this sort of meme, found from @memes on Instagram (though findable on many corners of the internet) shows an image of a softly smiling baby with the text above reading, “Me on FaceTime ignoring everything the person is saying and looking at myself” (Figure 1.5). This post has 62,590 likes and 1,764 comments. President Trump has retweeted memes featuring himself;<sup>9</sup> British Vogue put out a listicle titled “The Greatest Fashion Memes of 2017.”<sup>10</sup> Memes are everywhere.

---

<sup>9</sup> “Trump Tweets out Meme of Himself Eclipsing Obama in Morning Rant.”

<sup>10</sup> “The Greatest Fashion Memes Of 2017 | British Vogue.”



Figures 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5: examples of lolcats, Pepe the Frog, and relatable memes.

The rare academics that do follow memes situate them as a contemporary kind of subversive art. New media art historians assert that memes are, in fact, rooted in a tradition established by radical artists of the past. One such impression comes from Alice Bucknell, a social anthropologist, artist, and culture critic. In a piece titled “What Memes Owe to Art History,” Bucknell outlines the ways that memes respond to and build off of the avant-garde tradition of the socially critical artists of yesteryear. Bucknell says: “High-art purists eschew the argument, but the aesthetic and social sway of contemporary meme culture has roots deep in the pre-digital art-historical canon.”<sup>11</sup> The memes in this project articulate the subversive artistic behavior from a specifically gendered (both female and non-binary) perspective.

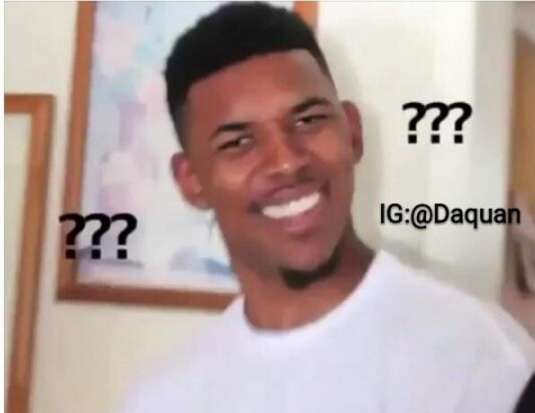
This study focuses on a subset of Instagram wherein women and gender nonbinary people employ the meme formats established through other Internet spaces to communicate their own content. These memers coopt the traditional meme layout, which has historically been used as a space for funny, flippant, palatable content. Once they infiltrate the format, they displace that silly content, which is perhaps specific and relatable, but far too edited. In its place, they write highly specific narratives about any number of topics that might be

<sup>11</sup> Bucknell, “What Memes Owe to Art History - Artsy.”

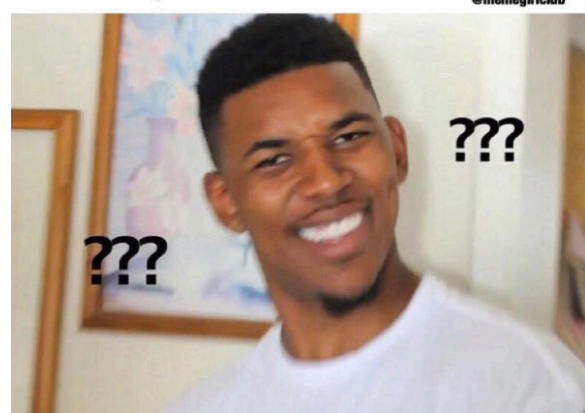
considered taboo: they consider activist issues of the moment, publicize mental health struggles, express anti-establishment beliefs, discuss the impacts of a patriarchal world, and engage with questions of intersectionality and identity. Creators of these niche memes foreground their personal subjectivity within the content itself, directly positioning the memes as gendered. Terminology is evasive, because the Internet is nebulous, but these memes can be categorized with some combination of “Femme Niche Emotional Intersectional Political/Feminist Memes.”

To illustrate how the memes in this study disrupt the superficiality of other memes, take two memes that use the same exact image. A confused but smiling Nick Young, a basketball player on the Golden State Warriors looks to camera. The three superimposed question marks on either side of his head emphasize his sense of bewilderment. One meme, from the more general silly meme genre, has this caption: “Old people be lyin. ‘In my day, we had to walk 100 miles to school thru snow across a lake of fire’” (Figure 1.6). The same image is reappropriated into this more specific, gendered genre, where the caption says this: “When white boys judge me for believing in horoscopes but they don’t believe in white privilege, rape culture, or toxic masculinity” (Figure 1.7). In using literally the exact same visual information, this second meme communicates completely different information. It lets the viewer know more about who is making it, the challenges they have faced, and the institutions of which they feel critical.

Old people be lyin. "In my day, we had to walk 100 miles to school thru snow across a lake of fire"



When white boys judge me for believing in horoscopes but they don't believe in white privilege, rape culture, or toxic masculinity



Figures 1.6 and 1.7: Memes from @daquan and @memegirlclub.

### Connecting Memes to Specific Forms of Artistic Practice

Memes grow out of a history of public and accessible art. Darren Wershler, the research chair of Media and Contemporary Literature at Concordia University, argues, "Memes are essentially 100 years of text art boiled down into your feed."<sup>12</sup> Many art historians meet this claim with major skepticism. In response to this, Bucknell argues that skepticism toward memes from the art-historical establishment is one indicator that they are, in fact, worthy of our attention. Bucknell looks to the ways that the key political movements and artists of the twentieth century were met with suspicion from the establishment. Her conclusion about the same establishment in the contemporary moment's reaction to memes: "That skepticism—and the way memes subvert it—reveals how the artistic lineage of memes is spun out of some of 20th-century art's most revolutionary ideas."<sup>13</sup> This makes sense when viewing memes as a form of political art. They are a completely democratized medium, from

<sup>12</sup> Bucknell, "What Memes Owe to Art History - Artsy."

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

the way they encourage viewer participation, to how inexpensive they are to make, to the way they circulate without any mediation from a top-down power. That kind of accessibility is fundamentally threatening to the art elite, and so its skepticism from therein should be taken with a grain of salt.

### *Memes & Performance Art*

The Performance Art movement of the 1960's has significant overlap with memes in its relationship between artist and audience. Bucknell describes how both mediums choose to actively disrespect this boundary in favor of a more nuanced connection between the producers and consumers of art. She writes, "Performance brought art into the street and public spaces, leveling the gap between artist and audience."<sup>14</sup> The importance of the accessibility of performance art rings true here. The impact that the Performance Art movement had on audiences was twofold. In elite spaces, it challenged the norms of consumption that allowed for audiences to feel they could view art from a safe distance. This meant that audience members were directly implicated in the artworks, expected to confront their own roles as viewers. The movement also transcended the exclusive spaces in a revolutionary sense: it allowed art that had been reserved for privileged audiences to shift into something in which any person could participate. Bucknell continues, connecting this kind of progressive spin on the art world to the world of memes. She says, "Similarly, memes offer a highly accessible and interactive platform of production that is ripe for challenge and dissent, with disagreements and controversy only fueling the fire of a successful meme truly going viral."<sup>15</sup> Again, through accessibility and interactivity, the sites of art, be they performances or static memes, allow for greater participation and engagement between artist

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

and audience. In fact, memes live and die by their reception, and that exchange of energy is critical to both mediums of art.

Bucknell goes on to describe how memes connect with performance art through their democratized medium and resistance to cultural norms. She explains, “Through humor, memes incite a collective reaction to everyday life as well as reveling in it, in a format no less playful than it is political, decoding the murky structural screw-ups, paradoxes, and hypocrisies of our current political climate.”<sup>16</sup> The lightheartedness of memes allows for them to engage with weighty political content in a way that is accessible and sustainable. They operate with the everyday feminist model—an undercurrent of political values punctuated with an aesthetic of humor and irony. Her point about memes indicating cultural trends and reactions while simultaneously encouraging them speaks to the nebulous nature of tastemaking on the Internet. There is very little top-down content within the ecosystem of social media, and this is particularly true within the landscape of memes. This goes along with the breakdown between producer and consumer—everyone who interacts with the art gets to make decisions and statements about what the art is saying.

### *Memes & Pop Art*

Beyond the Performance Art movement of the 1960’s, Bucknell draws material parallels between meme culture today and both Pop art. She describes how both mediums prioritize “narrative over material perfection,” meaning that the message communicated through the work was more important than the technical precision or skill evident. This is certainly true for memes—part of their charm is the clear DIY aesthetic. The choppiness of

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

the actual imagery indicates the high levels of accessibility in the art objects. Furthermore, the style encourages viewers to make their own content, if they feel so moved.

Memes and the Pop art medium share more in addition to their focuses on narrative. Bucknell explains of Pop artworks: “All were quick to circulate, and quicker to slip out of the spotlight. All share local, low-brow production materials, as well as collective ownership.”<sup>17</sup> Again, this works to undo the elite status of art making and viewing through material decisions. For Pop art, as well as for memes, the works circulating were/are low stakes. Meme artists have a firm awareness that their works will flit by in a viewer’s feed. They make their content with the understanding that it will be rapidly consumed, and so while they do have their personal favorites, they do not get too attached to any one artwork. Memes are relatively low-labor, and free to make once an artist has a smartphone and an Internet connection. This kind of material relationship to the art sets the stage for a potential ease of process. Memers have the option to spend hours perfectly finessing their image and message on a specific meme, but they can also make one drunkenly in the middle of the night with no immediate roadblocks. In the broader sense of the meme world, collective ownership comes through an inability to trace a meme back to its original creator. This concept takes on a slightly different meaning within the niche meme community, where authorship and personal experience is so foregrounded. These memes are extremely traceable, particularly when the artist uses herself as the visual material for the meme. Even with that shift in mind, viewers still feel agency to share and repost niche memes they find, and they certainly have of ownership over their readings of the memes.

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

### *Memes & Folk Art*

In order to have some flexibility in our definition of art, we can use Howard Becker's description of folk art. Traditionally, "folk art" as a designation has been reserved for "work done by country folk or to rural remnants of customs once widespread."<sup>18</sup> However, in his reading, Becker rebrands the use of the term to be more inclusive. He explains folk art to be:

Work done totally outside professional art worlds, work done by ordinary people in the course of their ordinary lives, work seldom thought of by those who make or use it as an art at all, even though, as often happens, others from outside the community it is produced in find artistic value in it.<sup>19</sup>

This kind of designation allows for a disconnect between the maker's intention and the audience's reception of a certain object or performance. Becker uses this terminology to discuss things like the singing of "Happy Birthday," housewives cooking dinner for their families, and quilting by non-specified craftspeople. Each of these examples objectively serves a utilitarian purpose, if to varying degrees of urgency. Along with that utilitarian purpose, though, individuals have space to infuse their own perspectives, values, and unique sophistications. The memes for this project hold similar weight. The people who make memes view them as serving the utilitarian function of facilitating personal expression. Of course, the memes hold incredible richness beyond just the utility of their existence. Many memers do discuss their practice as an artistic one, but even those who do not can certainly have their content included in a folk art reading of the memes.

---

<sup>18</sup> Becker, *Art Worlds*.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



## **Memes as Collective Action**

### *Sharing and Interaction*

Shifman explains the importance of sharing as a “central cultural logic” that is fundamental to the understanding of memes. She discusses the convergence of sharing as both a method of distribution and a method of communication. Individuals distribute cultural items—memes—and in doing so, they communicate their personal values and beliefs. With this notion of sharing in mind, we can further consider Shifman’s argument in terms of dissemination. She explains:

Memes may best be understood as the pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon. Although they spread on a micro basis, their impact is on the macro level: memes shape the mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups.<sup>20</sup>

Using memes specific to this project, Shifman’s notions of memes as macro influencers comes into focus through a gendered lens. The amount of reach that each of the posts by femme intersectional memers gets—and beyond the raw number of people seeing it, the amount of people who respond—indicates a real potential for impact among young women and gender nonbinary followers.

### *Production & Reception Processes*

The notion that art is a collective process influences our understanding of memes in both the production and reception stages of their existence. Howard Becker discusses the way

---

<sup>20</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*. P. 18.

in which art is never a process carried out by one individual. He explores the production process of artworks, explaining, “All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people.”<sup>21</sup> He describes that everyone who touches anything related to the art itself is inherently implicated in the process. This means that even though one person might have painted an individual painting, we can consider the people who make the paintbrushes, canvas, and paints used in the making of that painting to be an integral part of the art process. This is true, and particularly visible, when it comes to memes. The materials used to make a painting, for example, very cleverly conceal the labor



Figure 1.8: *L.H.O.O.Q.*.  
Multimedia piece by Duchamp, 1919.

that went in to synthesizing the paint or the canvas or whatever it may be. The source material of memes is quite clearly from somewhere else—the celebrity photo, the screenshot from a cartoon, the stock photo of the cute animal.

Though feminist theory is not explicitly discussed in his text, Becker’s work on collectivity in art production fits smoothly with the feminist theoretical concept of intertextuality. Coined by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960s,

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

intertextuality works to disrupt the authority of the singular author, instead arguing that any singular voice is necessarily influenced by any number of other sources.<sup>22</sup> Memes are fundamentally intertextual objects in that they are built upon reference. They use imagery that is directly sourced from media and popular culture, weaving multiple narratives into their existence as a singular object. The collectivity and intertextuality inherent in the production of memes is a democratizing force. Becker's example of Marcel Duchamp's subversive piece from 1919, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, *Mona Lisa*, helps illustrate this (Figure 1.8). In this piece, Duchamp takes a postcard of da Vinci's canonical *Mona Lisa* portrait, draws facial hair on it, and signs it. Becker explains, "When Marcel Duchamp drew a mustache on a commercial reproduction of the Mona Lisa and signed it, he turned Leonardo into one of his support personnel."<sup>23</sup> It destabilizes the elite positioning of its source material through using that material. Duchamp deploys intertextuality in his craft and redefines the established artistic hierarchy in his play with collective action. He undermines the untouchable status of the art canon by directly interacting with it, and making it his own. This is exactly what meme artists do in their own work—they appropriate commonly recognized images and repurpose them to express their own messages.

In discussing art as collective action, Becker also emphasizes the importance of post-production collectivity. The art world into which any specific piece is released has internal conventions, notions of who has authority and belonging, along with guiding, if nebulous, boundaries. These forces permeate throughout the production process, in that the artist is always responding to, if only to reject, the standards of the art world in which they decide to participate. Once the artwork enters its art world, the audience has say in enforcing the norms

---

<sup>22</sup> Kristeva and Moi, *The Kristeva Reader*.

<sup>23</sup> Becker, *Art Worlds*. P. 20.

of the art world, along with giving the piece its social meaning. This helps to underscore the disparate lives of meaning within memes as artworks: the creators can intend one thing, and any number of viewers can read their own equally relevant meaning into the object.

### **Can Memes be Political?**

At the outset of this project, I provided two interlocking ways of understanding meme work as political—the everyday political and everyday feminist. In *Memes & Digital Culture*, Shifman asserts that memes specifically can be an avenue for political expression. She goes on to define political memes in three categories of functionality: “1) Memes as forms of persuasion or political advocacy... 2) Memes as grassroots action ... 3) Memes as modes of expression and public discussion.”<sup>24</sup> She notes how memes can have popular political efficacy in larger regimes that are both democratic and undemocratic. The limitation with Shifman’s definitions of political content is that she is very much working within the framework of establishment politics. Her content examples are largely memes explicitly about political leaders, for instance. This project depends on a broader definition of the political—one that is best accessed not through meme content and process, but instead through form and space. It pushes her third point, that memes can be considered “modes of expression and public discussion,” closely examining the ways that those modes of expression through the personal can scale out into the political.

### *The Political Landscape is Online*

In his book, *Social Media and Everyday Politics*, Tim Highfield lays out how important digital platforms are in the consideration of wider political and personal issues. He writes, “The adoption of different politically relevant practices by increasing numbers of

---

<sup>24</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*. Pp. 122-123.

social media users highlights the importance of digital platforms as arenas for politics in addition to, and alongside, other personal concerns.”<sup>25</sup> Simply put: the contemporary political landscape has moved online. It is necessary to keep this in mind when assessing any aspect of the political world. Through their regular usage of social media in order to express their thoughts and feelings about a wide spectrum of issues, everyday citizens draw importance to social media as a space for consideration.

The fact that social media is an arena for politics is particularly important for marginalized people. Highfield discusses how women, LGBTQ people, and people of color use technological community space for unique purposes. He writes, “Social media and online platforms are employed for articulating identities, for challenging and subverting societal norms and for providing a voice (and safe spaces) for individuals and groups who might variously be marginalized, ignored, or under-represented elsewhere.”<sup>26</sup> This kind of discussion is extremely relevant to the sorts of memes this project explores. The memes themselves, here, are the site for expression of the notions that Highfield explains. It is also key that the people making the memes for this project are without exception coming from some sort of marginalized identity positioning.

#### *Specified Online Politics: Contemporary Feminism*

In her 2013 essay for The Guardian, “The Fourth Wave of Feminism: Meet the Rebel Women,” Kira Cochrane maps out structural and substantive elements of this contemporary movement.<sup>27</sup> The first key feature of the current feminist moment is that it is not simply an in-person movement, the way in which earlier feminisms were. Technology has evolved and

---

<sup>25</sup> Highfield, *Social Media and Everyday Politics*. P. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Cochrane, “The Fourth Wave of Feminism.”

allowed for a faster pace of consciousness-raising, community building, and change making. She points to various campaigns that have infiltrated platforms like Twitter and Facebook with feminist ideology, including the Everyday Sexism Project<sup>28</sup> and Eve Ensler's One Billion Rising.<sup>29</sup> We can build on this piece with subsequent knowledge of anti-patriarchal activism that has occurred since 2013. Though, of course, many actions have in-person components, a defining characteristic of the current iteration of feminism is that the Internet plays a crucial part in the expression and spreading of movements. We can look to a myriad of moments of collectivity charted through online expression, like #YesAllWomen<sup>30</sup>, Gamergate<sup>31</sup>, HeForShe<sup>32</sup>, Emma Sulkowicz's *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*<sup>33</sup>, #MeToo<sup>34</sup>, and Time's Up.<sup>35</sup>

In both everyday feminism (Crossley) and contemporary online feminism (Cochrane), new methods of communication work to communicate established feminist ideals. Niche memers use this new technological space, making content that fits within the larger feminist movement. In 2012, the Barnard Center for Research on Women held a summit of feminist writers and online activists to discuss the implications of the Internet as a space for

---

<sup>28</sup> A website founded in 2012 meant to document examples of commonplace sexism.

<sup>29</sup> A global movement to end rape and sexual violence against women.

<sup>30</sup> A hashtag campaign on Twitter wherein women describe instances of everyday misogyny. First used in the discussion following the misogyny of the 2014 Isla Vista shooter.

<sup>31</sup> A 2014 online harassment campaign targeting

<sup>32</sup> A 2014 United Nations solidarity campaign that encourages people of all genders to stand for gender equality.

<sup>33</sup> A 2014-2015 senior thesis project in which a Columbia University student carried a dorm mattress with her everywhere she went until the student who raped her in her dorm room was no longer a student at Columbia. She carried the mattress to graduation.

<sup>34</sup> A 2017 viral movement in which women who have experienced sexual harassment or assault wrote the words "me too" on their social media profiles. Explained at length in Chapter Four.

<sup>35</sup> A 2018 response to the #MeToo movement, meant to bring the struggle for equal rights into the legislative and judicial systems. Explained at length in Chapter Four.

facilitating social change. They produced a pamphlet which tracks important causes that are being fought for online, including sexual assault, street harassment, women's representation in media and body image, misogyny online, and workplace discrimination.<sup>36</sup> These issues and more are clearly in the minds of the relevant memers—their content seeks to engage these structural realities in a way that is easily accessible and shareable. The frameworks presented by Crossley, Highfield, Cochrane, and Barnard stop short of explicitly calling memes into the conversation. This project serves as an anchor to the idea that memes are deeply relevant and intertwined within not just the general political landscape, but the distinctly feminist landscape as well.

### *Status Quo Disruption & Revolution*

Becker examines how the boundaries of traditional art worlds can be challenged and ultimately overthrown through revolutionary young artists. It is important to note that Becker has a very broad sense of what can be considered an art world, and that his notions about art worlds can be scaled outwards into other kinds of establishments. First, he explains how art worlds can be defined in exclusive terms. Becker writes, “Wherever an art world exists, it defines the boundaries of acceptable art, recognizing those who produce the work it can assimilate as artists entitled to full membership, and denying membership and its benefits to those whose work it cannot assimilate.”<sup>37</sup> Here we have a stage set that is ripe for young people with fresh ideas to disrupt the status quo. Whenever there is an established norm, there are insiders and outsiders. The memers of this project are, in many senses, political and artistic outsiders who have been rendered marginal by centuries of misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and so on.

---

<sup>36</sup> Barnard Center for Research and Women. *#FemFuture: Online Revolution*. 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

The reaction to this kind of marginality, in cases of action, can be revolutionary and constructive of new spaces. In a section on art and craft worlds, Becker teases out the complex movements and changes within various forms of artistic establishment spaces. It is not necessary for this project to delve into the details of such discussion, but his explanation of evolution within art spaces is useful to us. He writes:

So the end point of the sequence in which an art turns into a craft consists of younger, newer, rebellious artists refusing to play the old game and breaking out of its confines. They propose a new game, with different goals, played by different rules, in which the old knowledge and techniques are irrelevant and superfluous, no help at all in doing what is to be done in the new enterprise.<sup>38</sup>

This is precisely what the meme artists in this project do. Not only do they disrupt the boundaries of the establishment, in-real-life art world (more on that below), but they also disrupt the guidelines of the establishment meme world. They utilize the format to make way for their own content.

## **Methodology**

### *Ethnographic Site: Instagram*

Instagram is a social media platform made for sharing photos, accessible through a smartphone application. It is where the memes I am interested in circulate initially, it is where the memers spend much of their time, it is where audiences react to and repost memes. Knowing how Instagram works is fundamental to understanding the significance of Instagram memes as a phenomenon. I would like you to be able to identify with the process

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



that the memers and their audiences engage in, even if you have never touched the app yourself.

I find that Instagram becomes most appealing in two situations: one, in moments of complete idling, and the other, when there is something absolutely pressing that is just a little too stressful to actually focus on. There is a pleasant, numbing quality to the simplicity of the interface. On the home page of the app, a user sees one photo (or video, but mostly photos) at a time, posted by people that they choose to follow. One can scroll through a Home feed, which is a collection of all the recent posts of the accounts that they follow. For me, this means having Rihanna, intersectional feminist memes, my best friends, and guilty pleasure aspirational interior design accounts all in one place. It is truly the perfect visual cocktail for turning my brain off, if just for a short while. I can see the number of people who liked and commented on the images posted in my feed, and I myself can choose to like or comment as well. At the bottom of the screen, I can navigate away from my Home feed to other areas of the app: the Explore page is another type of feed, which uses the mysterious and effective Instagram Algorithm to bring me content from outside of the accounts that I follow that “You might like.” The center option is the Post button, through which I can navigate to share my own picture or video, from my phone’s saved photo library or taken on the spot.

Memes on Instagram have an affective difference from the rest of the Instagram feed because they are visibly curated art objects. So much of Instagram’s content is made up of photos of people, or fancy food, or nice scenery. These are artifacts which people post on the platform to communicate a sense of a lived, in-the-moment experience. Even if they are heavily curated (think: your friend slapping the fork out of your hand at brunch so that he can meticulously organize the plates of food for the perfect aerial shot), they are still meant to be

a naturalistic depiction of what's going on in someone's life. Memes digress from this model. Though the creative idea comes from a lived experience of a human person, the meme itself is created and circulated within digital space.

### *Interlocutors*

I wanted to speak with people whom I believed were making exciting content—content that seemed to combine personal experience with feminist theory with cultural critique and more. I sent direct messages to accounts that I had been following from the start of my inquiry; I collected images I found compelling; I spent hours scrolling through my explore page on Instagram, looking for new people to speak with. I wanted to get a diverse range of voices represented in this project, and so I kept that goal in the forefront of my search. Many accounts did not respond to my messages, or initially responded with excitement but ultimately fell off in communication. The people I did end up collecting stories and theories from came from a mixture of sources—some I discovered independently, while some were referred to me by other interviewees in snowball sampling. In one particularly funny interaction, my outreach to one account, @blackgirlmemer, prompted her posting a harsh meme: the text on the image reads, “Trying to play it cool when strangers on this account DM<sup>39</sup> me for interviews, projects, offer to pay me, and then never respond when I agree.” Below is a stock photo of a smiling black woman, with additional text: “y’all are some trifling asses, but I won’t put you on blast because I’m a nice negro.” The caption explained a larger context of this happening to her—a reporter from VICE, someone who offered to pay her bills, and so on. Sadly, despite my follow-ups with her, we were never able to connect for an interview. This was an unfortunate larger trend—people who agreed to

---

<sup>39</sup> “direct message”

speak with me were able to give me an hour or so of unpaid labor. Though not always true, a majority of the time, those people lived lives in which they had that kind of time to spare, which produced specific race and class patterns in the actual pool of people I spoke with. Respondents skewed white and middle to upper class.

Ultimately, I conducted nine interviews with memers. Two were in-person interviews, one was in an email exchange, and the remainder occurred over some form of video chat software (i.e. Skype, FaceTime, FaceBook video call, Google Hangouts). The femmes that I interviewed were diverse across many intersectional planes. I use the term “femmes,” and not “women” here because my respondents had a diversity of gender identities—ciswomen, genderqueer, nonbinary, and trans\*. Femme comes with the inclusive flexibility of not being cisnormative. Femmes who are not cis might still have feminine gender expression, but there is more wiggle room within the word. In any case, all of the femmes I spoke with are responding to, coming up against, and rejecting varied forms of patriarchy. My interlocutors range in age, but are concentrated in the 18-24 demographic. With regards to sexuality, I spoke with people who identify as straight, queer, bisexual, pansexual, and asexual, along with people for whom sexuality was not a salient enough identity marker to mention. Some of my subjects live in Canada, but most live in the United States—mostly in urban centers. Their personal level of education is widely varied—from high school graduate to college dropout to current college student to working toward advanced degrees in arts or humanities. A majority of the people I interviewed described a history of mental illness, though none mentioned any physical disabilities. They are artists, students, youth advocates, tutors, writers, musicians, or unemployed.

I want to be clear about my own identity positioning, because my embodied experience informs my entire perspective on this project. I am a white, ciswoman. I am culturally Jewish but neither my family nor I are religious. I am able-bodied and neurotypical, meaning that I have never struggled with mental illness. On both sides of my family, I have grandparents who pursued higher education. I grew up in a very liberal urban center on the West Coast of the United States, and I carry those liberal values with me. I am within the exact age demographic of my informants.

The discussions I had with my interlocutors were very much driven by the same guiding questions for this thesis: how do the memes that they make operate at every stage of development? How does making this content shape the spaces of the artists, both on and offline? How might the process contribute to identity building? Questions were largely uniform between interviews, with space in between for memers to riff on any topic they so chose. I spent time in the beginnings of the interviews trying to get a sense of the backgrounds of my interlocutors. We discussed how they identified personally, where they were from, their education levels, what kinds of media they paid attention to, if they cared about politics, and so on. After that, we got into the nitty-gritty of their processes of making memes: how they got into the process, what goes in to making a meme, what they decide to post. I asked how they viewed their memes, if they paid attention their audiences, how they related to Instagram as a platform, how their worlds had changed since they started making memes. I sought to understand the production process more clearly.

### **Overview of the Project**

In this thesis, I employ a feminist understanding of politics to argue that memes are political artifacts. Memes gather political power from the process through which they come

to be, along with sources outside of the creative process. In Chapter Two, I argue that memes are a distinctly feminist art medium and practice. They simultaneously draw on and contribute to the tradition of intersectional feminist art, gaining political valence their historical roots. I investigate the art historical precedent for contemporary memes, offering the term “protomeme” as a designation for the ancestors to our current day memes. I draw connections between contemporary memes and canonical feminist artworks by Artemesia Gentileschi (1593-1653) and the iconic feminist activist art collective, the Guerrilla Girls. Both of these examples showcase how memers use culture jamming to upset the conventions of their times. I then examine how a more academic feminism operates in memes through homage and citation, using a meme that directly engages with Yoko Ono’s performance art, *Cut Piece*.

Chapter Three explores the way in which memes are sites for community building. I argue that as a medium, memes are inherently community objects with power that flows from all sides between creator, audience, and social world. Foregrounding the voices of memers, I examine the different motivations that femmes have for creating and posting their works. These range from personal validation and processing to getting and giving feedback to catering to their imagined communities. Following this, I describe how memes facilitate online community spaces that also have the power to transition offline. These descriptions indicate a feminist undercurrent to the communities that memers build, and feminist theories around coalition building further illustrate this. Memes are the medium through which these politically significant communities come to be.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I investigate how memes can encourage political readings that fit with the sociopolitical landscape in which they circulate. Using the theory of political

opportunity structures, I argue that the #MeToo and Time's Up phenomena provide the social context for memes made by femmes to expand in political significance. In circulating the Internet in this specific time, the messages of the memes become open to broader political interpretation. To illustrate the political salience of memes in this day and age, I perform a close reading of three memes that operate as gendered critiques of patriarchy through the lens of everyday feminism.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *INSTAGRAM MEME AS FEMINIST ART OBJECT*

#### **Art Historical Prelude: The Protomeme**

A chubby baby floats through the sky, hovering just above a rose bush. The sky behind her is blue, populated with adequately non-threatening white and gray clouds. A piece of golden fabric flows around the baby's little wings. The shining red of her curls visually echoes through the tone of her cheeks and lips. Mouth upturned in a coy smile, eyes glazed over and looking ahead, her tiny arms reach out for a dove that flies in front of her. Another dove carries some kind of ribbon behind her. Any contemporary viewer could easily identify this adorable little person as a cherub, a winged angel baby known as an attendant to the God of Abrahamic religions. There is no text in the image, no choppy Photoshop: this is not an Instagram meme at all. In fact, it is *The*

*Progress of Love: Love Pursuing a Dove*, painted by Jean-Honoré Fragonard in 1791 (Figure 2.1). The artist uses visual style and recognizable iconography to connect with his intended audience. The viewers of his time who could access his work would be coming to it with context—biblical reference points, other paintings of cherubs, narratives drawn from their social worlds.

Contemporary memes evolve out of a long art historical tradition of intertextual, referential artworks. Limor Shifman believes



Figure 2.1: *The Progress of Love:  
Love Pursuing a Dove.*  
Painting by Jean-Honoré Fragonard,  
1791.

that memes are a larger body of cultural texts; that the word “meme” necessarily refers to a group of artifacts.<sup>40</sup> I define the category of memes for this project differently—as individual artworks united through conventions of style and theme. That said, Shifman’s definition is helpful in connecting memes to their ancestors in art.

I offer the term “protomeme” as a designation for these corresponding art historical phenomena. Protomemes are artworks that precede contemporary memes, paving the way for them to develop in the contemporary moment. They can have one or both of these characteristics: 1) they are specific narrative and stylistic trends of expression from the past and/or 2) they communicate information and circulate as contemporary memes do. Much like our contemporary Internet memes, they circulate throughout the public consciousness; they are recognizable and enjoyable and easily legible; and they carry potential for modification from artist to artist. Fragonard’s painting fits into a popular protomeme of the Renaissance and Baroque periods: cherubs. Just as there is potential for feminist intervention in the memes of today, women artists of yesteryear infiltrated the protomeme conventions by infusing their work with political messages. Intersectional niche memes do not solely exist in the contemporary moment, on the Internet today. Part of their power—in both an analytical and personal sense—comes from the fact that they grow out of a centuries-long tradition of feminist action.

The protomeme allows us to think critically about what it means to reclaim art objects as feminist at a moment after creation. Some of the historical women artists featured in this chapter were explicitly making activist art; most of them were not. This extra-political motivation for creation and after-the-fact political reading connects them to the femmes

---

<sup>40</sup> Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*.



making the memes in this study. All of the work here is politically important, personally moving, and read as feminist whether or not the artist intended it. Memes of today are part of a distinctive historical process. They are works imbued with feminist politics, they advance the causes of feminist politics, and they actively put feminist works of yore into conversation with the contemporary moment.

In the early 1600s, Italian visual artists of all kinds were largely preoccupied with depicting biblical and deuterocanonical scenes in their artworks. The same narratives were recycled, as each artist allowed their own particular style to guide their rendition. This Renaissance and Baroque trend is a protomeme because of the way that the narratives circulated, how they were recognized and popular in a public setting, and how countless artists reinterpreted them. Art historian and social theorist Michael Baxandall argues that artists of the day would actively use images, symbols, and materials that were legible to the middle-class merchants who commissioned their pieces.<sup>41</sup> This legibility and social context is as important in the protomeme as it is in the Instagram meme of today—without a receptive audience, these pieces go nowhere.

---

<sup>41</sup> Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*.

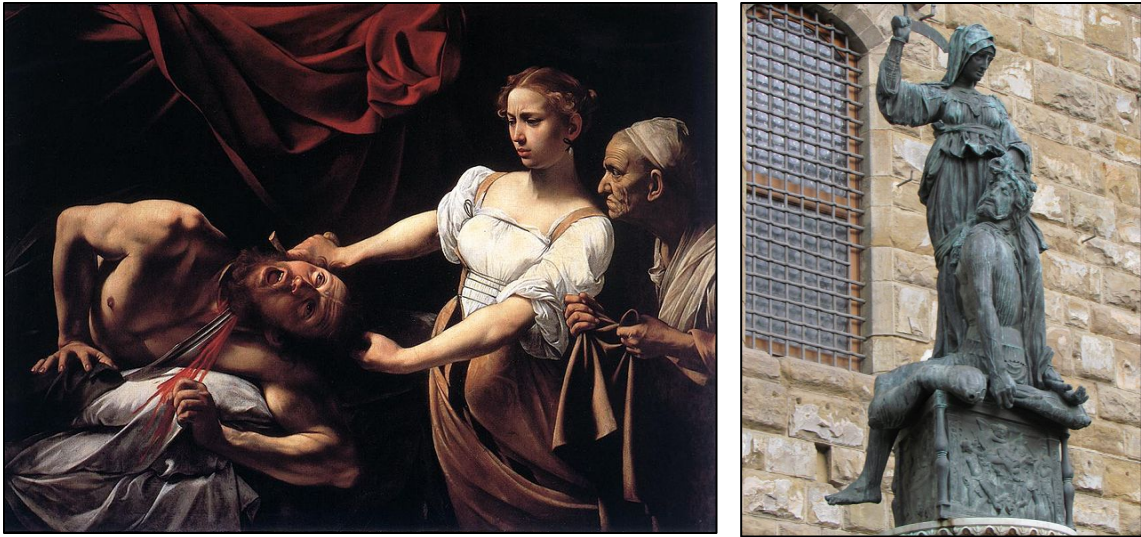


Figure 2.2: *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. Painting by Caravaggio, 1599.

Figure 2.3: *Judith and Holofernes*. Bronze sculpture by Donatello, 1455-1460.

One popular deuterocanonical story—a protomeme narrative—was Judith beheading Holofernes. Holofernes was an Assyrian general looking to destroy the village of Bethlua, the place Judith called home. Judith was granted proximity to the general because of his sexual desire for her; he passed out due to overconsumption of alcohol; and Judith beheaded him, saving her home state from destruction. Popular understandings of the story changed over time: in the Renaissance, Judith was viewed as a great heroine, symbolic of courage against tyranny of the oppressor. As time wore on, however, popular receptions of Judith skewed negative. Male artists were quite preoccupied with the coalescence of sexuality and violence in the story. Some have charted this progression as a fall from grace: a shift from a Mary to an Eve.<sup>42</sup> Regardless of this change in popular perspective, the artists drew, sculpted, and painted the story consistently throughout the Renaissance and Baroque periods in Europe. Caravaggio painted *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (Figure 2.2); Donatello made an iconic bronze sculpture of a scene from the story, *Judith and Holofernes* (Figure 2.3). Their

<sup>42</sup> Camara, “Gentileschi, Judith Slaying Holofernes.”

works are different variations on the same cultural information, the same story—their works both utilize the same protomeme.

Just as the memers of today infuse established meme formats with their own personally loaded material, Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653) painted a rendition of the Judith protomeme saturated with her own experience. Her work, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* depicts the moment at which Judith brutally beheads the Assyrian General Holofernes (Figure 2.4). The crucial difference between Gentileschi's painting and all other iterations is that she paints herself as Judith and her ex-mentor and rapist, Agostino Tassi, as Holofernes.<sup>43</sup> Gentileschi uses the protomeme format of the Judith story to express her own experience of trauma. This implanting of her own story shifts the protomeme from a recognizable, relatively enjoyable story to an avenue for processing her story, and beyond that, exposing the audience to that story. She serves her own intimate need for expression and personal justice, articulating perhaps even a hope for recognition. Any middle-class viewer of Gentileschi's time would have been familiar with the story of Judith, and so Gentileschi's choices to base the characters on herself and her rapist would

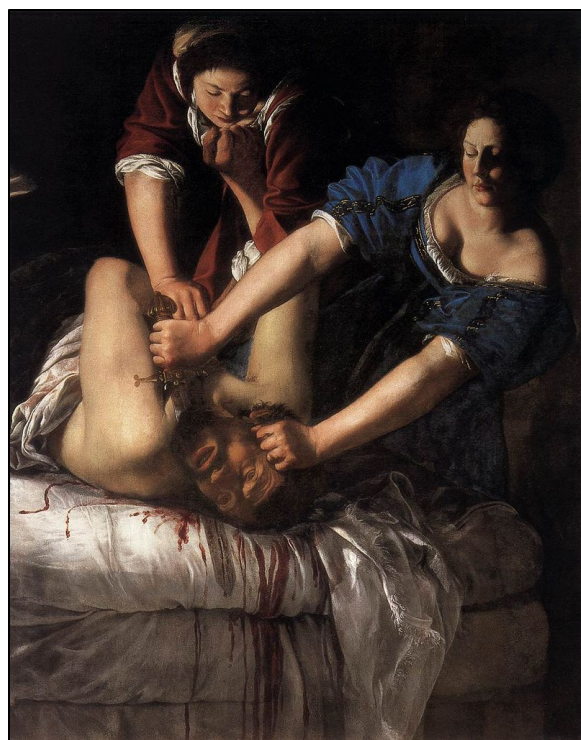


Figure 2.4: *Judith Slaying Holofernes*.  
Painting by Gentileschi, 1614-20.

<sup>43</sup> Christiansen, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*.

not have been lost on viewers. She infuses her own personal and political messaging into the acceptable format, entering her story into the annals however it might be accepted. It is a sophisticated bait-and-switch: the artist attracts the viewers' attention through this popular format and narrative, and then (perhaps not so) surreptitiously infuses a new significance. We see these same unconventional uses of banal meme formats with our niche memers today. Gentileschi's artistic choice lays the groundwork for contemporary articulations of personal experience in memes.

This kind of targeted messaging through image appropriation, this protomemeing, also occurred in the twentieth century. An example of more recent protomemeing comes from the Guerilla Girls, an anonymous feminist art collective. Founded in 1985, the Guerilla Girls firmly sit at the intersection of art and activism, describing themselves as “the conscience of the art world.”<sup>44</sup> They use gorilla masks to protect the identities of their fluid membership—over 55 members coming and going since 1985.<sup>45</sup> In their own words: “We undermine the idea of a mainstream narrative by revealing the understory, the subtext, the overlooked, and the downright unfair,” they write, “We believe in an intersectional feminism that fights discrimination and supports human rights for all people and all genders”<sup>46</sup> The Guerrilla Girls make inequality and injustice visible, even inescapable, through compelling and entertaining visual and textual material.

---

<sup>44</sup> “CHRONOLOGY.”

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> “OUR STORY.”

Accessible public art is the method that the Guerrilla Girls utilize for the purposes of reaching this liberatory goal. In the early days of the group, the Guerrilla Girls used wheat paste poster campaigns around the streets of New York City's East Village and SoHo neighborhoods. The posters were simple and clear, using facts to illuminate the inequity of the art scene in the city. Plastered across the city were messages such as “ONLY 4

COMMERCIAL

GALLERIES IN N.Y.

SHOW BLACK WOMEN.

ONLY 1 SHOWS MORE

THAN ONE.” (Figure 2.5)

Many posters called out

specific galleries,

museums, and corporate

sponsors by name for their

lack of representation;

others listed male artists

who allowed their works to be shown in galleries that had few or no women represented.

These works embody the political protomeme in terms of communication and stylistic form.

The common citizen in their social context would easily understand these protomemes; they

circulate in a fashion that is relatively easy and economical. In the same vein as Gentileschi

using an accessible public narrative, the Guerrilla Girls used an accessible public form—the

wheat paste poster—to communicate their disruptive messaging.

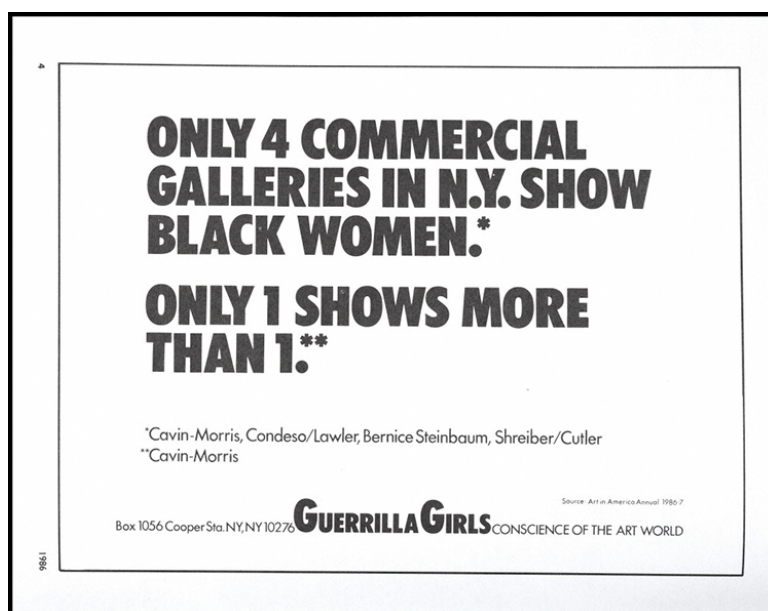


Figure 2.5: A Guerrilla Girls wheat paste poster, 1986.



A compelling illustration of their political art visually emulates a meme: a poster that originally ran as an advertisement on the sides of New York City buses in 1989 (Figure 2.6). In the poster, we see a black and white image of a nude woman lounging sprawling across the left side of a bright yellow backdrop. According to the Tate Modern, “the image is based on the famous painting by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) entitled *Odalisque and Slave*.”<sup>47</sup> This woman is based on specifically the slave woman within the original painting. Her positioning is relatively demure, showing the back of her naked body and the side of her breast. Her legs are crossed in modesty, layered on the hot pink, old-timey couch she rests on. She holds some kind of feather tickler; she wears bangles on her wrist. Perhaps the more iconic thing she wears, however, is the angry gorilla mask on her head. This kind of comedic, ironic subversion of the original image is underscored with the text present on the poster. Boldface text across the top of the poster reads: “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” Beneath this, a grim statistic reads: “Less than 5% of the *artists* in



Figure 2.6: *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into The Met Museum?*  
Bus advertisement by the Guerrilla Girls, 1989.

<sup>47</sup> Tate, “‘Guerrilla Girls’ Identities Exposed!’, Guerrilla Girls, 1990.”

the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the *nudes* are female.”<sup>48</sup> At the bottom of the poster, we see, “Guerrilla Girls / Conscience of the Art World,” along with their NYC mailing address.

The Guerrilla Girls’ “Do Women Need to be Naked?” is an important example of a protomeme. Both the Guerrilla Girls’ poster and contemporary memes are forms of public art, meant to be easily accessible and consumable by vast numbers. The posters on the side of New York City buses could be seen by any number of the 1.486 million people populating the borough of Manhattan in 1989.<sup>49</sup> Similarly memes might reach each of their artist’s followers, or better yet, they might hit the Instagram explore page and reach an audience even more vast. Neither work requires much on the part of the audience—they are meant to be user-friendly and open to the public. They are meant to pack a punch in a context where they are necessarily consumed quickly. The speed of scrolling through hundreds of images a day on Instagram is not terribly unlike the speed of catching a glimpse of an advertisement before a bus pulls away from a red light.

This kind of protomeme activist/artist discourse lays the groundwork for the rhetoric and implicit practices of Instagram meme work. Femmes who are making the memes present in this study work to make the invisible unavoidable on the Internet. Their works are celebratory in their discussions of the social taboo. Memers create their own spaces and content that feels relevant to them. Through this practice, they undermine the importance of the mainstream narratives that have historically never served them anyways. The Guerrilla Girls are a positively self-identified political activist group, while the creators of these

---

<sup>48</sup> Note: on the poster itself, the words italicized here are not italicized, but rather typed in pink font as opposed to the black font on the rest of the poster. Refer to figure 2.6.

<sup>49</sup> “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts.”

memes have a more complex collective identity in terms of political identification. That being said, both forces work to expose the socially obscured for the purposes of liberation.

### **Culture Jamming & Everyday Feminism**

With the context of protomemes, the memes of today make more sense as a mode of expression that we can read as feminist. For centuries, women have taken established modes of expression and infused their own politics therein. Contemporary niche memes grow out of this tradition. The first section of this chapter investigated how the works of artists at different points in history provide a kind of line of ancestry for the memes we see today. The next two sections make an analytical shift, thinking instead about how contemporary artists appropriate the material content and strategies of protomemes in service of their meme work.

The framework of culture jamming helps explain the appropriation of material into meme work. In the forward to a collected volume on the subject, Marilyn Dery explains that culture jamming occurs when artists are disgruntled with an institution, often a capitalist corporation.<sup>50</sup> In order to draw attention to the problems with the system, artists use the iconography of that very system. This typically takes place through reworking a familiar image or logo to showcase something problematic about that image. For example, someone might take the Starbucks Coffee logo and photoshop it to say “Six Bucks Coffee,” indicating how expensive their consumer products are.<sup>51</sup>

The protomemers discussed above articulate their own kind of culture jamming. Gentileschi takes the deuterocanonical protomeme and embeds herself in it, making the story with many interpretations unequivocally about justice and retribution for her rape. The Guerrilla Girls use the streets of New York to circulate messages about the injustices they see

---

<sup>50</sup> DeLaure and Fink, *Culture Jamming*.

<sup>51</sup> “Culture Jamming with Six Dollar Coffee.”





Figure 2.7: Meme from @kinayamemes.

in the art world, relying on an accessible style that is widely legible. The contemporary memers in this section use similar kinds of culture jamming to express themselves. This kind of politics through memes is an everyday feminist variety. I shift here from the historical to the contemporary, investigating how intersectional niche memes of the moment draw on protomemes.

@femmediary<sup>52</sup> performs culture jamming through a meme that looks like a classic starter pack. Starter packs were a popular meme format from 2016-2017 that employed clip art images to communicate a specific type of person or situation. One Bowdoin College-specific example comes from @kinayamemes (Figure 2.7). In the upper left hand corner of a plain white background, italicized Helvetica reads: "*BOC starter pack.*"<sup>53</sup> The clip art populating the rest of the image includes: bare feet showing a very stark tan from the popular adventure sandals, Chacos; the logo of the Wilderness Medical Associates International; a screenshot of a Google search for indie rock band "the head and the heart" shows in Portland, Maine; a bottle of Dr. Bronner's soap; a SpikeBall set; and a screenshot of an iMessage that reads, "i understand that the BOC is a privileged space but that's just where a majority of my

<sup>52</sup> Formerly known as @givingintosocietalpressure and @queerprayingmantis.

<sup>53</sup> The BOC is the Bowdoin Outing Club.

friends are.” This meme pokes fun at the absurdity—and problematic nature—of the Bowdoin Outing Club. For our purposes, it serves as a helpful archetype for the starter pack format.

The background of @femmediary’s meme is millennial pink,<sup>54</sup> and at the top of the image, a boldface pink font reads: “WHITE WOMEN.”

Peppered across the center of the image are clip art images: we have images of the Starbucks logo, a rose gold iPhone, a pair of Adidas sneakers, a can of pink grapefruit La Croix, the Lancôme Paris logo, and a tube of Summer Color self-



Figure 2.8: Meme from @femmediary.

tanning lotion. Underneath the images, more text reads, “now that I have your attention / STOP / fetishizing black men / it’s fucking disgusting and you aren’t as innocent as you act” (Figure 2.8).

Though they use the starter pack format and easily recognizable images, @femmediary disrupts the classic message communicated. @femmediary is a gender nonbinary memmer whom I spoke with about this strategy of interference. They told me about the traditional use of this kind of meme format as it relates to their meme: “With starter pack

<sup>54</sup> A soft baby pink popularized by the cosmetics brand, Glossier, and found everywhere in the 2016-2018 aesthetic of products marketed towards young women.

memes, if I said something like, ‘That girl that’s in my philosophy 101 class who asks a question every five minutes,’ and if I put all those same images in, it would get like 10,000 likes on the explore page.” This was a deliberate choice to capture the audience’s attention and shift it into something more productive. They said, “I framed it in a different way. People automatically are like, ‘Oh look, it’s something I like to consume’ or, ‘I like to make fun of people like that.’ They see it, and then they see, ‘Shit, actually it has a message on it, and so I can’t just consume this and throw it away.’” They continued, “I’m gonna use pictures of La Croix to make you address your internalized racism.” This is the same practice that we see with the Gentileschi painting—instead of using pictures of La Croix, she used pictures of biblical scenes, and she traded internalized racism for explicit misogyny and rape culture, but the essence is the same.

Another memer, @ghosted1996, exhibits a combination of culture jamming and everyday feminist politics through a meme she posted on August 17, 2017 (Figure 2.9). The meme is a still image from the 1983 George Lucas film from the Star Wars franchise, *Return of the Jedi*. In the foreground of the image, we see Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher) in her iconic gold bikini. Behind her looms Jabba the Hut, the physically nebulous (and notoriously repulsive) space alien crime lord. Overlain on the image is white text with black outlining—a classic meme font. Over Jabba the Hut reads “the male lead of a TV drama,” and lower down on Princess Leia is text that reads “VS. the female lead.” The caption on the image reads: “Lmao<sup>55</sup> bitch..... tell me why literally every woman on television could be a covergirl and I could wipe my ass w<sup>56</sup> their male counterparts.” In a comment on the image, the artist

---

<sup>55</sup> “laughing my ass off”

<sup>56</sup> “with”

replies to a comment: “@godsonlyson it’s all media, I shouldn’t have even restricted it to TV roles.”<sup>57</sup>

@ghosted1996’s meme connects with the Guerrilla Girls’ bus advertisement of 1989 through its parallel image source material. The Guerrilla Girls poster’s woman is based on the painting *Odalisque and Slave* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique;

@ghosted1996’s meme is based on Star Wars by George Lucas. Each of these original sources is an art object made by men, largely for men, and subsequently canonized by institutions and popular culture that is dominated by men. Each one relies on the objectification of women to pander to the male gaze and increase the visual pleasure of the masculine viewer.<sup>58</sup> In both images, the

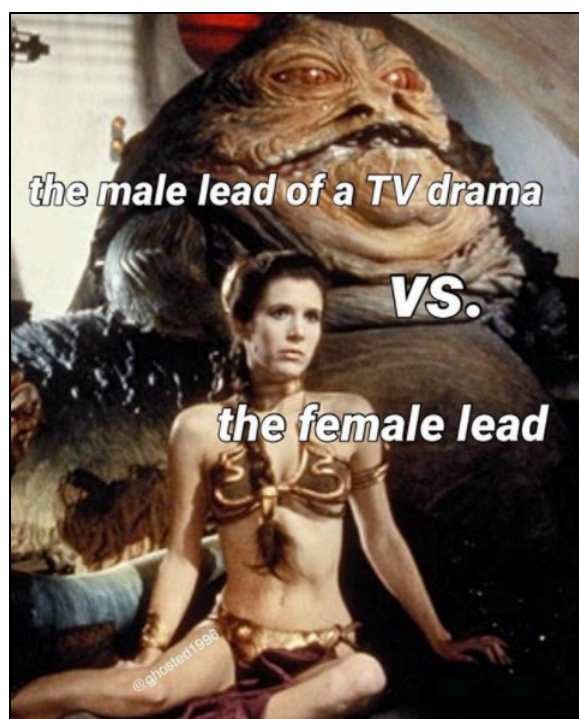


Figure 2.9: Meme from @ghosted1996.

women featured in the original source material are positioned in the role of sex slave. In *Odalisque and Slave*, the woman is literally named as “Slave” and nothing else. In the Star Wars film, Princess Leia has been captured and, as shown in the image selected for the meme, has been chained to Jabba the Hut. The lack of sexual agency, in fact, the explicit sexual objectification of the women in the images is clear. Both of their bodies have been placed in the same position to communicate simultaneous overt sexuality and weakness.

<sup>57</sup> “@ghosted1996 • Instagram Photos and Videos.”

<sup>58</sup> Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*.

They are meant to be fodder for visual consumption by a male viewer. The female artists at work here mine these spaces for their images—they use intertextuality to situate their artworks in this larger social context of female objectification by men.

The text is used in both artworks to generate a more complex reading of the image at play. The language serves to complicate the narrative of the sexy, objectified female form. The image in the Guerrilla Girls poster is already partially disrupted by the presence of the gorilla mask, and so the viewer might be more open to receiving subversive textual material with this image than with the meme. The headline font question posed in the poster, “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?,” is what we would consider today to be a kind of clickbait question. That is to say, it is meant to draw interest and exploit viewers’ “curiosity gap” so that they are just itching to find out the answer to the question.<sup>59</sup> In contemporary journalistic terms, we can look to Betteridge’s law of headlines—the (humorous) adage that “any headline that ends in a question mark can be answered by the word *no*.”<sup>60</sup> Perhaps this is anachronistic and driven by the author’s millennial positioning, but it seems safe to assume that headlines of this kind are met with skepticism. Viewers do not expect these sorts of questions to have any factual backing—they predict a resounding “No!” The fact that the statistic is actually present on the poster to back up the question is shocking. With this rhetorical formulation, the audience is taken aback by the confirmation that the question is indeed necessary. The structure of the poster underscores how absurd the statistic is in the first place, and therein communicates its message through both form and content.

---

<sup>59</sup> News, “Mind the ‘Curiosity Gap.’”

<sup>60</sup> “TechCrunch Posts Lies, Refuses to Apologise | Technovia.”

In the meme, the text serves a few purposes, both implicit and explicit. We can further unpack the presence of text attached to this image through the difference between the actual text overlay versus the caption of the image, and further, the textual comments and interactions in that section of the forum. The explicit function of the text (“the male lead of a TV drama vs. the female lead”) is to call attention to the inequality of physical representations on television. Through the comment mentioned earlier, we can expand this understanding of inequality to a broader notion of media. Through focusing on one element of gender inequality—the physical differences between men and women on television—the meme illuminates a grander truth about beauty standards and valuation methods for different genders. This is a larger feminist cause of the contemporary moment: that women are held to unrealistic and excessive physical criterions. These standards, propagated by the media, undermine women’s abilities to cultivate a sense of self-esteem from nonphysical qualities. This meme very clearly calls attention to the issue of inequitable standards between men and women.

The caption of the meme makes it clear that the image is referring to the physical attractiveness of men versus women on television. What else can we read into this image and text combination? Princess Leia, here, is the slave of Jabba the Hut. This image could also insinuate the ways in which women in media are in a kind of bondage—an inability to act with agency in terms of representation, a consistent need to be deferential to the men. Additionally, Leia is played by an actual human person, Carrie Fisher, while Jabba the Hut is some kind of gigantic puppet. This could have implications about the standards of performance for women and men onscreen, and in life. Men can do much less work—can

literally be a basically immobile nebulous mass—and still operate with more agency and freedom than the women around them.

Each of the artworks discussed in this section uses the combination of text and image to draw attention to itself, communicate an easily digestible tidbit of information, and leave a lasting thought in the mind of the viewer. This section utilized these artworks—poster and meme—as texts suitable for close reading. The fact that this kind of art does real work on multiple levels of engagement is important. One can consume its significance quickly and easily, from just a glance at the side of a bus or a slight pause in your Instagram scrolling. In addition to this superficial skim, one can also dive headfirst into the apparently simple image and text. One can find deeply resonant moments of intertextuality (perhaps intentioned by the artist, perhaps read in by the viewer) that more concretely ground the work.

### **Artistic Homage & Academic Feminism**

In the above section, we explored how text art can be read in conjunction with Instagram memes. The Guerrilla Girls used (and still use) an explicitly activist angle to inform their artistic practice. Many iconic feminist artists' work is not so overtly about changing systemic inequalities through direct calls to action. The culture jamming that occurs as an articulation of everyday feminism is not the only way that feminist politics occurs in the meme landscape.

This section will explore a different approach to the practice of feminist art: Yoko Ono's performance of "Cut Piece."<sup>61</sup> Alongside the work by Ono will be a meme by @fiona\_apple\_butter. The meme in this section directly responds to Yoko Ono—it uses a still image from "Cut Piece" as its visual material and takes on Ono's perspective in its text.

---

<sup>61</sup> [“MoMA | Yoko Ono. Cut Piece. 1964.”](#)

In Chapter 1, I outlined Alice Bucknell's argument that memes connect to various forms of radical art. Here, let us recall that performance art and meme work both disrupt the traditional boundaries between artist, artwork, and viewer. Though Ono's performance piece shares this analytical feature with contemporary memes, her performance is not a protomeme in the ways of Gentileschi and the Guerrilla Girls. Due to the nature of the meme in play, this section will be less of a direct comparison between the two works and more of a case study on the interaction between memes and feminist art. The meme operates as a powerful tool of citation while still operating as a responsive and situated art object in its own right.

The artistic homage and citation, which occurs in @fiona\_apple\_butter's meme, exemplifies a more academic form of feminism. The identity politics of the creator do matter here—@fiona\_apple\_butter is a PhD student of American history. She has formal theoretical training at a level that is much more advanced than the majority of memers profiled in this project. That said, she still has an adept grasp on popular culture and niche meme expression. Her schooling allows her to more explicitly integrate history within her work, which is clear through her Yoko Ono piece.

Yoko Ono has been a multimedia artist and activist for over fifty years. Though she is popularly well known for her marriage to John Lennon, she is an incredibly influential artist and musician in her own right. Ono has had with multiple retrospectives at major museums, curatorial credits for art festivals, and major musical accomplishments. Her practices in the 1960s and 1970s are widely regarded as foundational to the body of feminist art. "Cut Piece" was originally performed at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo. For the performance, Ono sat on a stage wearing an expensive suit. She had a pair of scissors in front of her, and invited audience members to cut pieces of her clothing to take as souvenirs of the performance.



Throughout the performance, Ono sat still as people slowly cut off nearly all of her clothing. People have read this performance in all manner of ways—it has been described as being about the trauma of war, about bodies in space, about feminine performance through clothing and masking, about exposing power dynamics, and more.<sup>62</sup>

@fiona\_apple\_butter's meme is a direct response to "Cut Piece," and to Ono's legacy more generally. The work shows plaintext font on a white background taking up the top portion of the square, with a singular image below the text. The image here is a still from the footage of Yoko Ono's original performance of "Cut Piece" from 1964. The image shows Ono near the end of the performance, with all clothing but her bra having been cut off and removed by the audience. She sits, composed yet clearly emotional, directing her gaze up and away from the white man with scissors poised, about to cut the strap of her bra. This is the man who took an amount of time that greatly exceeded the other audience members shown in the video footage to carefully cut off Ono's undershirt and bra—all while smiling and laughing. The text above the photograph of Ono reads: "wen u created a complex n profound n groundbreaking body [of] performance art, but due to a dense lasagna of racism, xenophobia + misogyny literally the #1 thing yr known for is the wild myth that u ostensibly 'broke up' every white guy's favorite band of all time." The caption of the image reads "plz take yoko ono more seriously [tea emoji]" (Figure 2.10).

---

<sup>62</sup> "MoMA | Yoko Ono. Cut Piece. 1964."

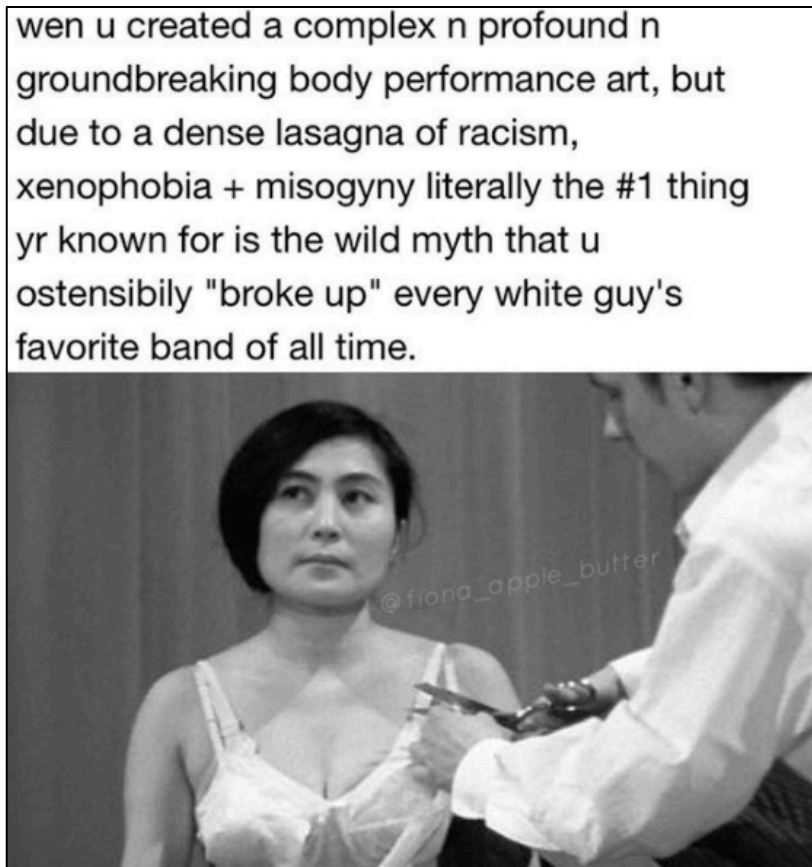


Figure 2.10: Meme from @fiona\_apple\_butter.

of the meme itself is a much more direct condemnation of the popular reception surrounding Ono, though it still uses some anti-oppressor rhetorical strategies that will be discussed shortly. Through asserting Ono as a serious figure alongside the injustice of her reputation, @fiona\_apple\_butter uses reference as a form of intergenerational coalition building between feminist artists.

For the image content of this meme, @fiona\_apple\_butter selected the moment of the performance at which the white man is snipping away at Ono's bra. As discussed above, "Cut Piece" is a pioneering piece of conceptual art that has been subjected to countless interpretations. What we see in this moment is a white man attempting to take excessive,

This meme is an instance of directed citation as a form of power. More specifically, this work uses citation as an attempt at undoing an unjust history, at reworking the power structures that contributed to that history. The caption of the image—"plz take yoko ono more seriously" is a soft, seemingly casual indictment of this prejudiced legacy. The text

violent control over the narrative of the performance. Through his attempt to expose Ono's breasts, this man sexualizes the stakes of the performance. He works to shift the focus from Ono's cerebral conceptual questions to his assertion of power over her body. The exposure of this power dynamic, of course, becomes an integral part of the performance. Through placing this specific image in the context of the textual message of the meme, the artist connects the legacy of white men's controlling narratives about Ono to this moment in her art.

This meme is a prime example of how a significant amount of substance can be packed into such a brief instance of virtual text. One immediately conspicuous aspect of the text is the amount of Internet shorthand used—language choices such as “wen” for when, “u” for you, “n” for and, “yr” for your, and the lack of capitalization. Though this kind of textual expression is ubiquitous in meme culture, it is particularly interesting to investigate within this context of an academic feminism. One possible reading is that even in this academic approach, the memer uses this language to render the work legible to anyone on the Internet. Though this meme employs theoretical language (“racism, xenophobia + misogyny”), the style of writing situates it in a context that is clearly the Internet. The rhetorical style of the meme renders the theory appropriate for the space of Instagram, pulling the highbrow information into an accessible light.

The downplayed language can also be read as a strategy of the oppressed for communicating socially disruptive information. We can look to feminist scholarship on language by bell hooks to flesh out this idea. In theorizing about language, hooks discusses the complexity of its power as a tool of oppression and potential liberation. She invokes Adrienne Rich, who writes, “This is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you.”<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*. P. 167.

This challenge is particularly salient within the space of academic feminism. hooks explains that “It is evident that we must change conventional ways of thinking about language, creating spaces where diverse voices can speak in words other than English or in broken, vernacular speech.”<sup>64</sup> Though the oppressed need the oppressor’s language in order to communicate with each other, they can adjust their communicative style to feel more true to experience.

hooks’ discussion of modifying the oppressor’s language can be applied to @fiona\_apple\_butter’s choices here. This kind of performative disinterest in convention can be read as an attempt at coming off as somewhat apathetic, or “chill.” This is definitely a theme across niche memes such as this—women making light of serious issues. Many of the memers I interviewed described this as a kind of ironic twist on the constant depiction of women as crazy, overreacting, or unreasonable. Using lighthearted language to describe heavy, and heavily gendered, content is a method of self-effacement. @goldnosering memes: “White supremacy after Labor Day? lmao<sup>65</sup> so tacky!” (Figure 2.11).



Figures 2.11 and 2.12: Memes from @goldnosering and @manicpixiememequeen.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> “laughing my ass off”

@manicpixiememequeen uses the same exact meme format and lack of capitalization as @fiona\_apple\_butter, writing: “when after years of therapy u still fall back on the same toxic behaviors u used to” (Figure 2.12). Thinking through the language in this meme as an adjustment of the oppressor’s language, we can read this strategy as a way of wiggling into the mainstream something that, if it were communicated with all the justified emotion actually attached to it, would never make it into that space.

Beyond the communicative style of the language used, the content offers further political power in this meme. The choice of “a dense lasagna of racism, xenophobia + misogyny” encapsulates the linguistic vibe of niche memes. They directly juxtapose the comedic and the serious, the silly and the social justice-y. It harkens back to the style of the Guerrilla Girls, using comedy and irony to make a serious point. This combination of tone packs an even greater punch when combined with the later text in the meme that reads, “the wild myth.” The audience, here, gets slightly jolted around by the shifting tenor of the language. “Wild myth” very clearly illuminates the absurdity that Ono is, in a wide sense, exclusively known for this idea of her breaking up the Beatles. In conjunction with the “dense lasagna of racism, xenophobia + misogyny,” what we have here is a dangerous, absurd, threatening concoction of white male power. The words here paint the same picture as the laughing white male in the video of the original performance—the people in power are able to be flippantly violent towards women for literally no reason. Both Ono’s original performance and the meme draw attention to the sickening injustices of these systems of power.

Drawing from foundational feminist performance art, this meme offers an alternative reading of history in the face of an unjust legacy—intergenerational coalition building. This

interaction and articulation of common ground between feminists is an inherently political act. Beyond that, is it possible to also read @fiona\_apple\_butter's meme as its own instance of performance art? It is, of course, a performance of quite different material conditions than Ono's original work. "Cut Piece" is in large part about the body existing in space, interacting with audience in a live moment. The Instagram meme is entirely removed from an experience of corporeality—except in cases like the in-person meme shows, it exists exclusively online. So much of feminist art theory discusses the experience of the female body through art, but what about in this new age, of the cyber-existence with real, lived consequences? Instagram houses the same kinds of conceptual interactions that would occur in an in-person space.

When someone posts a meme, it is meant to be seen and interacted with. Particularly on accounts with thousands of followers, there is immediate feedback on the artistic content. The comments on this meme are indicative of this. Furthermore, inherent in any kind of artistic exploit are decisions about what to show and what not to show. Instagram forces the hands of artists to be creative with form. In this singular square of image and text, @fiona\_apple\_butter makes a statement through deliberate performance. The work is intertextual and makes political statements about race, identity, and belonging. The artist experiences a barrage of feedback within seconds of posting—some positive, some negative, some so far as violent. Even when the meme is meant as a critical statement on an unjust reputation and legacy, the parallels between meme and art are unmistakable. Though the methods may shift and change over time, the meanings of contemporary memes are offshoots from a long-standing feminist tradition.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### MEMES AS COMMUNITY BUILDING SITES

@thatanxiouswitch loves making memes using witches of all kinds. The majority of her works feature some recognizable witch (or person with a witchy air about them) from pop culture: the sisters from *Hocus Pocus*, an animated Samantha from *Bewitched*, Winona Ryder in *Beetlejuice* among them. One meme has a simple white background, with a photograph of Melissa Joan Hart in her role as the title character from *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, a hit ABC television show from the late 1990s to early 2000s. Sabrina is pointing in a



witchy way with her index finger, resting her other hand confidently on her hip. She directs a self-assured smile at the viewer. Delicate periwinkle sparkles flow from her spell-casting finger. Superimposed over the sparkles, descending on the right side of the image,

Figure 3.1: Meme from @thatanxiouswitch.

are messages in alternating pink and red font: “people that take more time to grow than you are not your problem,” “you can grow out of people, thats [sic] okay,” “you do not have to wait around for them to grow,” “you can find other people that are already ready for you,” and “don’t torture yourself for people you know wouldn’t do the same for you” (Figure 3.1).

At face value, the meme seems to carry words of advice directed toward the viewership of @thatanxiouswitch’s account. Each message offers a gentle push that encourages the reader to exit whatever toxic interpersonal situation they might be

experiencing. Beyond just the words, the image of Sabrina evokes empowering female energy. The show chronicles her life with her two aunts, demonstrating the positivity of strong female relationships. Furthermore, one of Sabrina's leading personality traits is that she confidently stands up for herself whenever the situation calls for it. She and her aunts are also literally witches. The witch is an identity that many contemporary feminists across the pop culture spectrum claim.<sup>66</sup> The figure has come to represent a rejection of a cultural history of demonizing women.<sup>67</sup> The witch's presence among this body of meme work seems to emulate that social understanding.

Beyond just supporting her audience, the meme provides a forum for @thatanxiouswitch to process her own challenges. In an interview with the author, she explained that she made the Sabrina meme after the final time she talked to a now ex-friend. This is one example of how her meme account operates as a space to work through various traumas. "I'm still going through it," she said of this friendship ending, "it's still me processing." Many commenters shared messages of support for @thatanxiouswitch, helping her continue to work through the event. Even more than getting nice comments about it, she described feeling personally motivated by the catharsis that comes with sharing a meme. "I get a release from it. I can share, I can get it out there, that's why people journal. If you get it out of your head, then it makes you feel better."<sup>68</sup>

@thatanxiouswitch's motivations for memeing are twofold. Firstly, the personal validation and catharsis feels good to her. Secondly, she is sensitive to a community of audience members who may benefit from her work. She described some of her positive

---

<sup>66</sup> See: Comedy Central's *Broad City* episode, "Witches;" Rapper Princess Nokia's song "Brujas."

<sup>67</sup> Sollée and Conover, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*.

<sup>68</sup> Westfall, Interview with @thatanxiouswitch.



feedback to me: “People have told me, ‘your account is really good for me. I’m like, ‘Cool, somebody needs it.’ If somebody needs that post, it was worth it.” Though she does directly receive responses from some audience members, @thatanxiouswitch does some imaginary work in considering her virtual community. She explains, “I’m sharing because kids feel scared to talk about [things], so I’m like, okay, I’m talking about it, I’m older, you can do whatever you want.”<sup>69</sup> It is unclear whether she has heard from the “kids” she describes above, or whether she just believes they are there, out on Instagram.

The feminist implications of this community building come into play through both contemporary everyday feminism and a bell hooks’ theory on politically mobilizing solidarity. In *Finding Feminism*, Crossley argues throughout that the community and coalition building that takes place between young women is an essential lifeblood of contemporary feminism. Without communities of women sharing grievances and recognizing collective experience, feminist activism cannot be mobilized.<sup>70</sup> hooks echoes this sentiment, arguing that coalition-building between people in different struggles is beneficial to an activist presence. She describes how communication between people in different marginalized social spaces “Strengthen[s] our solidarity, enhance[s] the scope and power of our allegiances, and further[s] our resistance.”<sup>71</sup> Communication through memes is a means to this understanding of a collective experience. This, in turn, is a means to political solidarity and resistance. Through the critical feminist lens, community and relationship building is an inherently political action.

The way in which @thatanxiouswitch interacts with her virtual community through

---

<sup>69</sup> Westfall, Interview with @thatanxiouswitch.

<sup>70</sup> Crossley, *Finding Feminism*. P. 120.

<sup>71</sup> hooks, *Talking Back*. P. 126.

memes sets the stage for the explorations in this chapter. In this chapter, I investigate how memes are complex objects in the arena of feminist community building. I argue that memes are inherently sites for interpersonal interaction. They have power to facilitate community in a way that is incredibly flexible. Memers conceptualize and interact with their audience communities in myriad ways: from their relatable content, to their personal validation, and their desire to support others, specifically their younger viewers. This chapter draws on the works of various cultural sociologists to make sense of how memers operate in their communities. It also showcases the voices of memers themselves, who shed light on the personal processes of relating to the community on Instagram. Memers create their works with communities in mind—Wendy Griswold’s framework of the cultural diamond helps explain how that process occurs. Benedict Anderson’s work on imagined communities also provides a foundation that illuminates how memers conceptualize and curate community through their memes. Finally, meme communities influence an experience of the world offline, which can be understood better with a return to Howard Becker’s notions of art worlds.

### **Consciously Created Communities**

Although niche memes are made with personal expression as the main goal in mind, memers consciously construct their works with the full understanding that they are meant to be experienced by an audience. As @fiona\_apple\_butter illustrates, memes are inherently a communicative method that allow for constant interactivity. “I think it’s the nature of making memes—there is an exchange inherent in the practice,” she explained. “They’re made to be seen by other people, and specifically, they’re made to be related with other people.”<sup>72</sup> This

---

<sup>72</sup> Westfall, Interview with @fiona\_apple\_butter.

thought process guides her aesthetic choices when it comes to the production process.

Enabling legibility is key; an audience member must recognize the context of the images used, have some recognition of the situation being described, and have some personal resonance with the meme. “You never know what is going to be like that [viral],”

@fiona\_apple\_butter said. “Well, you know some things aren't going to be like that. You know that, I dunno, ‘My dad looks like Foucault’—I know *that’s* not gonna go viral. That's not a viral meme, that's absurd.”<sup>73</sup>

Memes are accessible precisely because people can take what they wish from them, superimposing meanings from their own lives onto the artifact. Sociologist Wendy Griswold’s cultural diamond explains the mutually constitutive relationship between cultural objects’ production and varied interpretations.<sup>74</sup> Each point of the diamond is labeled with a different cultural actor: the topmost point is the “Social World,” the sides are “Producer” and “Receiver,” and the bottom is “Cultural Object.” All points are connected to each other through their own lines (Figure 3.2), indicating that the object is not just informed by the artist who makes it (the producer). Rather, a cultural object is equally informed by the social world in which it is

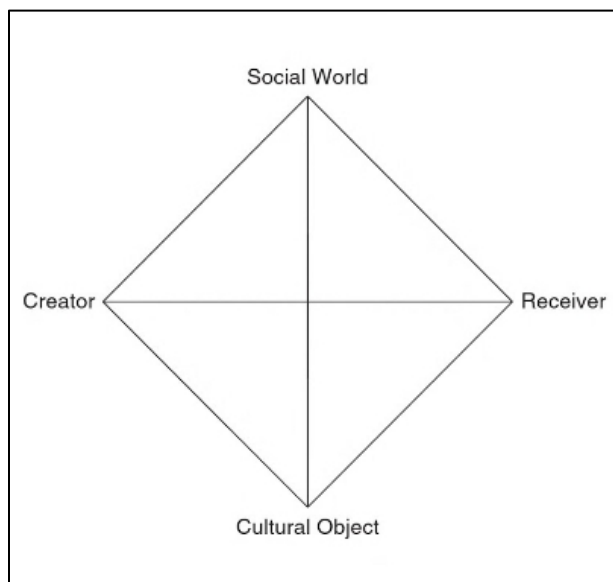


Figure 3.2: Wendy Griswold’s Cultural Diamond

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Griswold, *Renaissance Revivals*.

produced and read, and by the person who views it (the receiver).

The cultural object, the meme, is embedded in the social world. With regard to the production of memes, “Social World” represents context of the broader niche Instagram meme community, as well as the world in which the meme is both produced and received. These can be two totally different social environments, but they are connected through the cultural object. Each new meme that somebody makes has the capacity to influence and update the social world. Where starter packs used to be in vogue, now Tinder matchup memes<sup>75</sup> take their place (Figure 3.3). This evolution of visual culture is possible because memes are constitutive participants within their social worlds.

The “Producer” and “Receiver” are the meme artists and the people who look at memes on Instagram, respectively.

Producers and receivers both inject their own meanings into the cultural artifact, the meme. Memes rely on their intertextual references being legible to their viewers, and producers take that into consideration in the production process. However, as @fiona\_apple\_butter articulated above, there is no real certainty as to which references will resonate on a large scale. The cultural diamond allows



Figure 3.3: An example of a Tinder matchup meme from @leozoned.

<sup>75</sup> Tinder matchup memes use the formatting of the online dating application, Tinder, to demonstrate that two things are “a match!”

us to view the meme as a dynamic site where energy and significance flows in and out, shifting and changing with every person it touches. This exchange is inherent to the cultural object, making it a location where interpersonal relations, however virtual, do occur.

Memers choose to use the second person voice in their messaging, demonstrating the existence of their assumed audience. The second person is a ubiquitous syntactic trend in memes. The rhetorical device of “tfw u” (that feeling when you) pops up everywhere in meme culture, even beyond the ephemeral boundaries of the intersectional niche meme world. Even within memes that clearly come from intimate experiences, the second person is the syntax of choice. For example, a piece from @blacksheepmemes shows a block of black-on-white text above an image from pop culture, using the second person to articulate its message. The text reads: “when you can only be affectionate by perverting your feels<sup>76</sup> and showing them in a sexualized context cuz emotional intimacy makes you uncomf<sup>77</sup> otherwise.” The image below is a still of Samantha from the popular HBO show, *Sex and the City*, saying “Oh, come on, honey. Nothing’s better than sex” (Figure 4.4). The text draws from @blacksheepmemes’ experience moderating her own sexual and emotional landscapes, and yet, she uses the second person “you.” The language here indicates the expectation of audience response and recognition, even personal identification with the meme. It is meant to draw the viewer in through suggesting that they have personal stake in the issue raised here.

---

<sup>76</sup> feelings

<sup>77</sup> uncomfortable

Many memers articulate their own messy, personal experiences largely guided by this belief that people will relate to them. For one memmer, it feels complicated that her audience can relate so intimately to her struggles, particularly the challenging or traumatic ones.

@dyingbutfine describes, “It definitely feels weird to have personal emotional experiences

that you hope no one else would have, and then have them be so relatable to so many people. It makes me sad.” For her, it was a process accepting that other people experience issues similar to her own. Through this realization, @dyingbutfine can now place herself in the context of a

larger collective



Figure 3.4: Meme from @blacksheepmemes.

consciousness: “I was finding it difficult to believe that my issues don’t stem from my own failure, so much as systematic apparatuses. To see so many people identifying with stuff like that really drove it home how profoundly large some of these issues are.”<sup>78</sup> Memers use second person syntax as one way to articulate the understanding that the issues that have been taken up in the niche meme community are, as @dyingbutfine says, profoundly large. Again, this is an instance of feminist, collective consciousness raising that occurs through the formation of community.

<sup>78</sup> Westfall, Interview with @dyingbutfine.

Other memers described a longer train of thought as to the benefits memes can offer their viewers. @bunnymemes believes that there is nothing too intimate to post a meme about, because memes should be a shame-free space. She explains, “I think one of the most beautiful things about memes, especially personal memes, is that people are like holy shit, somebody else not only feels this, but they are expressing it to other people. I can be ok with whatever I’m going through.”<sup>79</sup> @bunnymemes’s imagined viewer goes beyond simply relating to the meme. They feel empowered by the fact that the memer is open about their topic, and they feel put at ease by the meme itself. This kind of narrative comes from real evidence. Every one of my interlocutors described receiving messages from their followers about the various ways the artworks had bettered their lives. That being said, this storyline indicates that memers do not always consider the realities brought to light by the cultural diamond—that every viewer has the power to read their own meaning into the memes.

### **Curated Communities**

Through their accounts, memers curate communities that they believe to be supportive, regardless of the actual feelings of the audience. This is possible through the notion of the imagined community, a theoretical model by Benedict Anderson. His work focuses on nationalism, looking at how the nation is constructed socially by those who self-identify as part of it. Every person does their own individual imaginary work to create this community with which they feel so connected. There does not need to be any actual interaction between people for the community to have very tangible effects.<sup>80</sup> This framework makes sense in terms of the Instagram community, where the platform is literally virtual. The communities of viewers that the memers make content for are often times

---

<sup>79</sup> Westfall, Interview with @bunnymemes.

<sup>80</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

thousands of followers, and even more viewers who stumble across but do not follow their accounts. Memers find evidence of their communities through comments, likes, and messages, but the vast majority of their viewers do not directly interact in such a way. The artists must create imagined communities to whom they can cater their work based on the evidence that they do see. It is worth noting that each niche memer I spoke with described their imagined community as incredibly warm and supportive, making trolls or bigotry surprising and easy to block out.

Respondents seemed comfortable with the fact that they had little to no control over the movement of their images across the Internet. However, they did seem to care about what occurred within their comment sections—the only immediate spaces they exercise control over. @bunnymemes told me, laughing, “I read all my comments.” She continued, “I guess because all my content is personal, and it's my thoughts. [My followers'] commentary on it matters to me.”<sup>81</sup> This assumption of positive support after posting underlies @bunnymemes' engagement with Instagram. The people she makes content for may or may not be there, but the assumption that they are there matters.

With a sensitive consumer in mind, @bunnymemes pays close attention to making memes that are inclusive to those people in terms of language and content. Every memer I interviewed echoed this sentiment. @bunnymemes said, “Depending on the subject of what I'm talking about, I try to be sensitive and make sure I'm using the proper words.” This sensitivity in language comes into play fairly often. She continued, “I do sometimes talk about topics, like gender, or social politics, race politics, things like that. I don't ever want to seem like I'm overstepping boundaries, or that I'm trying to speak for somebody that I have

---

<sup>81</sup> Westfall, Interview with @bunnymemes.



no right to speak for.”<sup>82</sup> This kind of attention allows for the formation of a community that can build to a level of political solidarity when the opportunity arises. The groundwork is established so that respect, visibility, and inclusivity come through as political values.

While @bunnymemes cares deeply about her followers, she reports a major discrepancy between her imagined community and what she refers to as “the masses” of Instagram. This imagined discrepancy has tangible impacts on how @bunnymemes chooses to interact on the platform. She explained, “A lot of the things I post are very nuanced. Once something I post hits Explore, [the people who see my account through Explore] are either gonna be like ‘you’re fucking stupid’ or ‘you’re a whore.’”<sup>83</sup> In her description of the Instagram masses as opposed to her followers, @bunnymemes communicates a major affective difference. The violence of the comments she expects suggests a feeling of relative safety and comfort within her community of followers. She actively engages with her followers; she cares what they think about her posts. This is vehemently not true for those who she does not perceive as part of that community. @binchcity echoed the sentiment of caring about the feelings of certain people in her audience, while explicitly voicing how she does not worry about those who might be threatening or antagonizing. She explained, “I really try not to post anything that’s going to offend anyone who I care about offending. I don’t care if I offend men, or Republicans. I don’t really care if people are alienated by something that I very strongly believe in. I don’t really want them to be following me anyways.”<sup>84</sup> With the imagined supportive community comes the imagined hostile other, who is in turn not welcome within the memers’ communities.

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Westfall, Interview with @binchcity.

Keeping their imagined communities in mind, memers populate their accounts with material that is empowering to those viewers. @dyingbutfine uses images of Barbie Dolls to communicate complex spaces of expression for women in her memes. She notes, “I’m really interested in developing female narratives in my work that



Figure 3.5: Meme from @dyingbutfine.

come from an autonomous place.”<sup>85</sup> In one of her memes, two Barbie dolls lie on the ground. One has her hand out in gesticulation, while the other drinks a coffee. The black-on-white text at the top of the image says, “We talked about reasons we have for postponing our suicides u know first date stuff” (Figure 3.5). @dyingbutfine explains this meme:

Having those two Barbies have a casual conversation about suicidal ideation, or not wanting to live anymore, is immediately suggestive of them having rich and complicated internal lives. I don’t think that women are afforded that in general, and I don’t think the Barbie is afforded that at all.<sup>86</sup>

Mainstream media has historically only allowed complex characters to exist in the form of white men. Because they are the unmarked group in American culture, they get to enjoy the

<sup>85</sup> Westfall, Interview with @dyingbutfine.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

privilege that is diverse representation of character traits in media. In displaying two complex women having a conversation, @dyingbutfine makes space for her real-life women and gender nonbinary followers to be complex, too. Her goal of developing these autonomous female narratives combined with the meme medium suggests that this project is meant to serve her imagined community.

Many memers described being fueled to continue posting because of the positive feedback they received. @bunnymemes told me, “It’s really, really validating for me to know that I’m not just an insane sociopath that’s just going through this alone. And other people are like, ‘I really, really feel where you’re at.’ And either they’ve overcome it, or they’re just starting to feel that way.” @bunnymemes superimposes a shared experience on her audience; she knows that someone, somewhere has also experienced her struggle. The positive feedback represents the corroboration of her experiences through others sharing in them. She finds power in the fact of this, which motivates her to continue this work. So much of the experience of mental illness is about reckoning with an extreme sense of isolation and disconnectedness. In simply relating to other people through memes, artists can place themselves in a larger context. @bunnymemes places herself in solidarity with the people that consume her memes, making sense of her own situation through the cultural diamond. She is able to both lead and follow within the community.

Memers do not just receive guidance in their meme spaces—they give it, too. An engagement with a big sister identity reverberated through the words of many of my interlocutors. A majority of the people I spoke with identify as a person who has experienced trauma and wants to help minimize the occurrence of future traumas. They feel they can do that through connecting with younger people and imparting wisdom. For example, memers

such as @memegirlclub and @sensual\_memes regularly implore younger audience members not to date older guys. In a conversation with me, @sensual\_memes said, “Teen girls are so vulnerable. They’re the ones that I want to infiltrate and say, ‘Hey! Stand up for yourself! Don’t date older guys!’ I’m trying to do some preventative measures, so that some of the things that have happened to me maybe won’t happen to them.”<sup>87</sup> In the same vein, @memegirl club uses the rhetorical framing of calling out men in their twenties for preying on teenage girls, using words like “pedophiles” in her captions (Figure 4.5). This shows the teenage girl viewers that this sort of behavior is not to be accepted, while still placing the blame on the actual predator.

The sisterly attitude transcends just the dating scene. @thatanxiouswitch, who is nineteen years old, had a particularly sweet way of talking about the conflict that might come up for a younger viewer sifting through emotionally loaded memes:

It's easy when you're 12 or 14, to go to the negativity because you feel it, but then it makes you feel worse. So if, with my memes, I'm doing both—the ‘oh, I feel like shit,’ but then also the ‘oh, I've learned this thing and I'm going to explain it.’ I think that's good for them. All I can do to help is share my experience. Because I'm not a professional or anything, I'm just a frickin’ girl.<sup>88</sup>

@thatanxiouswitch expresses a very complicated self-construction here. She allows herself space to articulate her own negativity and vulnerability through memes, while keeping her younger audience’s sensitivity in mind. This leads her to curate more balanced content, foregrounding more explicit growth moments. She says this with the understanding that she

---

<sup>87</sup> Westfall, Interview with @sensualmemes.

<sup>88</sup> Westfall, Interview with @thatanxiouswitch.

is making a difference in people's lives, largely drawn from what she knows she would have wanted at the time. Ultimately, she almost undermines her own contribution to the community through saying that she is "just a frickin' girl." But we know that the sharing of personal experience and vulnerability in a candid way has tangible impacts on the lives of people who consume that content.

### **The Online/Offline Community Connection**

In many cases, the power of the imagined community to validate and give voice to memers transitions from online to off. Memers regularly make real friends from the Internet, talking regularly with other memers or people they met through memes more generally, participating in art shows with other memers, and even living with Internet friends.

@fiona\_apple\_butter had some particularly unique

intersections between her online identity and her in-person life. Since she began making memes and developed a following, she feels a greater sense of belonging in the social scene of the city where she lives. She told me, "This has given me the ability to see



Figure 3.6: Meme from @memegirlclub. IG stands for Instagram. The caption of this meme reads: "YASSSS CALL OUT PEDOPHILE SCUMBUCKETS"

myself as, I think maybe more a cultural critic in a way, than an artist, but I feel like now I have a space in my arts community that I didn't feel like I had before.”<sup>89</sup> Her online presence and community has completely changed the shape of her social experience in person. She also has the potential outlet of speaking on issues that resonate locally, and therein further curating her audience.

Returning to Howard Becker's discussion of rebellion in art worlds, we can make greater sense of the evolution of @fiona\_apple\_butter's offline social landscape. Memeing allows a platform for individuals to define their own conventions of behavior in their art worlds—to rebel against the old conventions and start again. Through her meme practice, @fiona\_apple\_butter feels a greater attachment to her offline arts community. This means that she has power to define conventions not just in her own meme work, but in the offline arts space as well. We see the functionality of the meme as a source of power transition from online to offline here.

Beyond her generally increased social clout, @fiona\_apple\_butter also described how her meme practice has broadened her space to make mistakes in her life. She told me a story about having friends of friends who follow her account over at her house. She ended up feeling very sad, getting too drunk, and causing a bit of a scene. She regaled: “It was a bad time. I was so embarrassed. But then my best friend was like, those people already know that you do that.” The fact that they were privy to her expressions of messiness online, she explained, negated the potential impact of her in person messiness. “I mean, I don't condone my behavior that night,” she said, “But it was cool—you almost set up this space for yourself

---

<sup>89</sup> Westfall, Interview with @fiona\_apple\_butter.

to be imperfect.”<sup>90</sup> Her assertions of self on Instagram allowed for her to live a more authentic life in person. Furthermore, the memes provide her a context for reflecting on her mistakes, allowing for a redefinition of the bad times into good art.

Through the community of Instagram, this authenticity comes with an intensified understanding of the lives of other people. Producers themselves are also receivers, they too are exposed to the intimate details of other people’s struggles. The learning that takes place here is another reason that memers choose to continue their practice. @binchcity elaborates:

I learn a lot, and think a lot about my own identity, and my own privilege, definitely because of social media activism. I think that's definitely helped shape my opinions. I do think that it opens a different space which may not have been opened in the past to talk about subjects that are relevant to people.<sup>91</sup>

@binchcity describes having her thoughts actively shaped by participating in meme work on Instagram. Not only do creators get a space to voice their own personal experiences and thoughts, they participate within a community that prioritizes listening to each other.

## **Conclusion**

Memes would not be what they are without a knowledgeable audience to view them. Memers know this, and their creative process reflects that. While memes are personally valuable for their artists as a method of expression and processing, they are further saturated with the expectation of community reception. As we learned through the cultural diamond, memes have multidirectional power in influencing (and being influenced by) their social worlds, their producers, and their receivers. Artists imagine communities when making their

---

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Westfall, Interview with @binchcity.

works, assuming a level of legibility and personal connection. This makes the memes better for the receivers—they are acknowledged as a valuable part of the process and experience. Online communities have tangible effects in the offline sphere, blurring the boundaries between art world conventions in the two spaces. Though meme communities are imagined, they are very real in their consequences. Feminist theory allows us to understand this community building process as an inherently political act, and the stories of the memers illustrate how powerful that politics can be.



#### CHAPTER FOUR

##### *THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF MEMES: EVERYDAY FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF PATRIARCHY*

Figure 4.1 displays a meme by @binchcity featuring reality star and mogul Kim Kardashian.<sup>92</sup> With tears in her eyes, staring off into the distance, hand over her mouth, Kardashian's face holds a mixture of emotions—bitterness, irritation, perhaps a bit of heartbreak. The text above the image reads, in black-on-white plaintext font: “me trying not to internalize the trash way men treat me and see it as a reflection of societally encouraged toxic masculinity and immaturity as opposed to a statement about my value as a person.”

@binchcity directly critiques toxic masculinity by associating it with “trash” behavior. Furthermore, in using the image of a distressed Kardashian, she calls attention to



the emotional turmoil that is a consequence of this male behavior.

The use of Kim Kardashian specifically matters here: she is known for her expert abilities to navigate public and private life. Kardashian curates her entire image, but her millions of fans feel as though they know her personally. @binchcity deploys Kardashian as an indicator that

Figure 4.1: Meme by @binchcity.

<sup>92</sup> Formerly known as @weareallmemes, which is the username that is watermarked on the meme.

protracted image engineering is necessary when it comes to her emotions about men. This meme is deeply personal: the memer exposes her own struggles with reconciling her sociological knowledge about why men might act terribly to her to the fact that it just hurts her feelings. The meme also makes sense within the greater conversation about toxic masculinity and all its consequences.

### **The Political Opportunity Structure & Reading Memes as Explicit Politics**

Memes take on political power that is informed by the social moment in which they are created. We can recall that the personal is political, and therefore, the meme of Kardashian inherently has a broader cultural implication. In addition to critiquing memes and memers from a feminist lens, social movement theory continues the conversation about memes' participation in the larger social landscape. Memes evolve in political significance beyond the singular experience of the artist. They tap into the politically relevant social factors of the moment, and in hitting that pulse, they are sucked into the popular political discourse of the day.

In this context, the issues with relevance in the social world of the meme are #MeToo and Time's Up. These social movements spread wildly in 2017 and 2018 and fight for women's empowerment through the avenues of sexual respect and equal pay. Founded in 2006 as a survivor's organization for women of color who had experienced sexual abuse, #MeToo became an international social media movement in 2017 following the revelation of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's pattern of sexual predation. Women worldwide participated by writing the hashtag "#MeToo" on their social media profiles, indicating that they, too, had experienced sexual harassment or assault at the hands of men. *Time Magazine* describes Time's Up as the "solution-based, action-oriented next step in the #Metoo

movement.”<sup>93</sup> Started by over 300 Hollywood women, the Time’s Up foundation focuses on gendered harassment and discrimination in the workplace. They work through the legislative and judicial systems, lobbying for gender parity, equal pay, and equal work environment laws and providing legal funding for women in all industries to fight sexual abuse through the judiciary.<sup>94</sup> *Time Magazine*’s person of the year for 2017 was “The Silence Breakers”—the public figures, celebrities, and ordinary people turned activists who thrust the issue of sexual misconduct into the mainstream spotlight through #MeToo and Time’s Up.<sup>95</sup> These movements center on women speaking out about the gross injustices they have endured under systems of patriarchy, rape culture, and male entitlement.

We can further understand our ability to read memes as political through the theoretical framework of political opportunity structures. Coming out of political sociology and social movement theory, political opportunity structures is one framework of social movement formation. Despite scholarly disagreement on the theory, political opportunity structures suggest that social movements arise at the right political opportunity.<sup>96</sup> The theory of political opportunity structures helps illustrate how memes can take on more significant political meanings based on their social context. The memes for this project do not exist in a vacuum in which the voices of women have no significance in a larger cause. The memes are entering a world of #MeToo and of Time’s Up, they circulate the Internet in Trump’s America. As Tim Highfield explains, the political landscape of today is online. The #MeToo and Time’s Up movements were spread through social media, bringing the discourse into the hands of any Internet user. Memes contribute to the democratization of historically academic

---

<sup>93</sup> “#MeToo and Time’s Up Founders Explain the Difference Between the 2 Movements.”

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Edwards, “TIME Person of the Year 2017.”

<sup>96</sup> Meyer, “Protest and Political Opportunities.”

language—terms such as “rape culture” and “toxic masculinity” and “privilege” and “intersectionality.” The memes make sense being read in this political context because their messaging seamlessly enters the politically driven conversation that rages on in the world around them.

The interlocking #MeToo and Time’s Up movements represent a feminist mobilization of personal narrative, wherein the stories of individual women take on greater political power within the social landscape. In this context, every woman who speaks out about a moment of mistreatment by men is adding evidence to the claim of a greater pattern, a greater system. Furthermore, ordinary women who historically have not had a platform are able to use social media platforms like Instagram to make their voices heard. Within this political moment, the Kim Kardashian meme above becomes about so much more than a single woman’s experience. The complexity of Kim’s expression implies the impossibility of living under patriarchy and remaining whole; the hand over her mouth evokes a long history of silence shared by women everywhere. It is a widely relatable concept and experience, and—even if it does not mean to—it firmly contributes to #MeToo.

This chapter highlights the ways that personal memes can produce broader social meanings. As a case study, I focus on everyday feminist critiques of men at three stages of interaction with women. The memes that follow point to 1) varied entry points into critiquing the bad behavior of a man, 2) a loaded platonic relationship, and 3) the sexual moment itself. Each meme tells a story that extends beyond the bounds of the personal narrative of its creator: they implicate larger social contexts, theoretical frameworks, and political ideologies. They participate in the political opportunity structure of the contemporary women’s movement, using humor and irony to make themselves known. In addition to the

frameworks provided by art history and feminist readings of community, the political opportunities provided by #MeToo and Time's Up enable a broader reading of these memes.

### **“Drunk argumentative Sam is a big mood”**

Samantha Giancola is clearly angry, yelling straight to camera, her gaze unflinching. She is spray-tanned and heavily eye makeup-ed, wearing large hoop earrings and a belted white tank top. She is more popularly known as Sammi Sweetheart, from the 2009 MTV reality show, *Jersey Shore*. Superimposed over her at sporadic places on @textbook\_virgo's

memes are red blocks with white text overlain. They say: “Nobody is impressed that you don't know any celebrity gossip and actually it's kinda weird,” “Astrology is real,” “I was wishing I was listening to Carly Rae Jepsen for the entirety of your noise show,” “I know I would look good without makeup too that's not a compliment,” and finally,



Figure 4.2: Meme by @textbook\_virgo

“You're not a feminist you literally live with a rapist” (Figure 4.2). The post is geo-tagged ironically at a location called “Argument-Centered Education.” The caption reads: “Drunk argumentative Sam is a big mood.” Within the meme community, “big mood” is a trendy

way of saying that one identifies with something. This is helpful context in illustrating that this meme comes from a place of personal experience and identification from the artist.

Sammi had quite intimate brushes with extreme toxic masculinity on *Jersey Shore*. Her love interest on the program was a character named Ronnie. An enormous part of his personality was his commitment to being macho—he was the largest man in the cast, and he would use his size to physically intimidate those around him. More prominent than his size, Ronnie was volatile, mean, manipulative, and physically violent on multiple occasions. The fact that the relationship between Sammi and Ronnie was allowed to occur onscreen, disturbing as it may be, makes sense in the context of the reality television ratings-hunt. That said, this was clearly an abusive relationship on many levels, and Sammi suffered greatly at the hands of Ronnie. This adds a layer of complexity to @textbook\_virgo's use of Sammi in her critique of the bad practices of men. Not only is Sammi played on television to be a gendered stereotype, she is a gendered stereotype who has directly experienced abuse in the public eye.

In choosing to articulate her thoughts through the character of Sammi Sweetheart, @textbook\_virgo calls to mind the extreme gender performativity that existed on *Jersey Shore*. The entire reality show centered on eight people together on a party vacation on the Jersey Shore, New Jersey. The subjects of the show were depicted as trashy partiers who were very committed to their aesthetic appearances. The men were obsessive about their “GTL,” or, gym, tan, laundry, routines, while the women were similarly attached to maintaining their gendered expectations for appearance. A content analysis of season one of *Jersey Shore* from 2016 proved that gender role stereotyping was prominent in the show, leaving the women—including Sammi Sweetheart—more closely associated with

“sexualized behavior and social/emotional gender stereotypes.”<sup>97</sup> This image of Sammi is saturated with the gender performativity of her own identity as it was exaggerated in the context of the television show. The memer uses Sammi to articulate these critiques of masculinity, rewriting her as a voice that warrants serious consideration.

Finally, the apparent distinction between the two sides of the woman at play here, Sammi Sweetheart and “Drunk argumentative Sam” is worth examining. Sammi Sweetheart is the part of Samantha Giancola who gets to exist in a fashion that is deemed contextually acceptable on *Jersey Shore*. She is adorable and affable; she doesn’t make a fuss when her boyfriend acts out, as boys are wont to do. Drunk Argumentative Sam is depicted on the show as a girl making a fool of herself. The drunk, overemotional, irrational caricature is socially deployed through the patriarchy as a controlling image, meant to make women feel insecure and empowered in their actions.<sup>98</sup> Through this meme, Drunk Argumentative Sam comes to represent a reclamation of the overemotional woman controlling image, redefining her as someone who we should take seriously. Her drunkenness comes to suggest a dismissal of previously held boundaries of acceptability, an ability to speak her mind without fear of consequence. There is a clear dichotomy of representation between Sammi Sweetheart onscreen and Drunk Argumentative Sam in the meme. Where norms of representation failed to protect Sammi on MTV, they come to Sam’s rescue when she is appropriated into this meme. The meme affords her the power of vocalization in a way that was never validated on television.

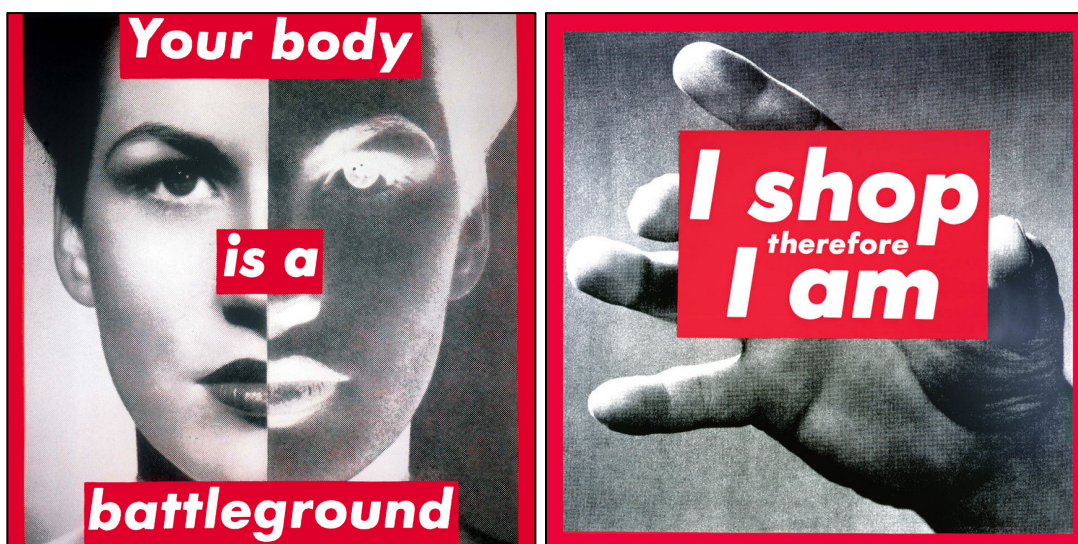
Drunk Argumentative Sam, in this meme, is peppered with text. The choice to include the specifically white-on-red text integrates this meme into a complicated history of

---

<sup>97</sup> Anderson and Ferris, “Gender Stereotyping and the Jersey Shore.” P. 1.

<sup>98</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*. P. 76.

feminist artistic expression, copyright issues, and gender dynamics. The white Futura text over the red rectangle is directly referential to Barbara Kruger, an iconic feminist text and pop artist who rose to recognition in the 1970s. Kruger is known for her red and white text over black and white images of domesticity, for making works that call out capitalism and gender restrictions. Images share slogans like “Your body is a battleground” (Figure 4.3) and “I shop therefore I am” (Figure 4.4).<sup>99</sup> Through using the same text art as such an established feminist artist, the memer might be aligning herself with the tradition of subversive feminist artworks.



Figures 4.3 and 4.4: Artworks by Barbara Kruger.

Given that this meme fits in the political opportunity of movements critiquing toxic masculinity, another reading is possible: the memer may be referencing the copyright scandal involving the Supreme skate-wear brand. In 2013, Kruger accused the skate company Supreme of plagiarizing her white Futura bold oblique text over a red box for their 1994 brand launch logo (Figure 4.5).<sup>100</sup> Kruger only challenged Supreme after they filed a lawsuit

<sup>99</sup> Nazif, “Barbara Kruger.”

<sup>100</sup> Nembhard, “Supreme Box Logo History.”



against a rival (woman-owned) skate company making products that also used the white-on-red text. When reached out to for comment, Kruger responded to Complex Media in the form of a blank email with an attached file labeled “fools.doc.” The attachment was a Microsoft Word document that simply read: “What a ridiculous clusterfuck of totally uncool jokers. I make my work about this kind of sadly foolish farce. I’m waiting for all of them to sue me for copyright infringement.”<sup>101</sup> According to Complex Media, Supreme is known to be an essential wardrobe requirement for “Fuckboys,”<sup>102</sup> whose bad behaviors are routinely the subject of intersectional niche memes.<sup>103</sup> This meme is already about a gender tension, and the choice to use a font with a loaded history underscores this.

In the meme, each line of text paints an increasingly developed picture of the man at



Figure 4.5: The Supreme Logo.

whom Drunk Argumentative Sam is yelling.

The first two lines of the meme, “Nobody is impressed that you don’t know any celebrity gossip and actually it’s kinda weird” and

“Astrology is real” both seem to address

points of interest that are socially constructed

to be feminized. The double punch of

“Nobody is impressed” and “actually it’s kinda weird” in the line about celebrity gossip is a direct affront to the aloof pretention that the masculine object surely projects. With this line, Drunk Argumentative Sam breaks through the smokescreen of constructed coolness that men

<sup>101</sup> Kamer, “Barbara Kruger Responds to Supreme’s Lawsuit.”

<sup>102</sup> A term used by millennial women to describe men who categorically do not respect women: who view women as exclusively sexual conquests, who do not care to communicate with baseline courtesy, who disregard female perspectives, and so on. Also spelled “fuccboi.”

<sup>103</sup> Babcock, “A Field Guide to the Modern Day Fuccboi.”

use to make women feel bad about liking what they like. The same principle manifests through the point about astrology—claiming astrology as “real” occurs in response to the implied assertion that astrology is silly, that it is girl stuff. Astrology, in its contemporary iteration, is largely done by female practitioners. It is used as a kind of spiritual or religious practice, meant to help make sense of things and articulate a caretaking tendency. To fight back against the male object of this meme, to say that “astrology is real” is to say that the interests of women are valuable and worthy of attention.

The next line of text posits a dichotomy between Carly Rae Jepsen and the infamous “noise show.” @textbook\_virgo writes, “I was wishing I was listening to Carly Rae Jepsen for the entirety of your noise show.” The noise show is similar to a concert, but instead of music, the artists just make abrasive noises. It is considered an underground, radical music scene—almost only performed by cis white men. The noise show was a longtime standby of intersectional feminist memes, particularly popular within the starter pack format. This was so true that it got to the point of becoming a hackneyed trend. One memer I interviewed told me, “If I see one more starter pack about the dude at the noise show, I’m going to lose my mind.”<sup>104</sup> Even if it has been played out past the point of no return, the noise show is a classic example of pure male self-indulgence. Staying true to this form, in a truly despicable article, VICE explains “WHAT A NOISE SHOW IS REALLY LIKE.” Before delving into the great victory that there are so few women playing in the genre (“A lot of them just aren’t good, the ones who are can often be total bitches, and above all else, relying on having a snatch as a novelty is shameful”) the article describes, “Noise shows with a dozen bands are always boring for hours at a time, a bunch of scumbag macho nerds trying to outdo one another in

---

<sup>104</sup> Westfall, Interview with @binchcity.

competitions that tap into the *National Geographic* sequences of their DNA.”<sup>105</sup> We can imagine, here, that Drunk Argumentative Sam has been forced to stand through the noise show, after being told that Carly Rae Jepsen isn’t real music. The assertion that Carly Rae Jepsen was what she would have rather listened to for not just a moment of the show, but for the entire time, is not simply a rejection of the noise show. It is a rejection of the epicurean, pretentious desires of cis white men to take up an inordinate amount of space.

The next critique of toxic masculinity comes as a response to the notion that women are more attractive or desirable when they have low self-esteem. The line in this meme takes this to task: “I know I would look good without makeup too that’s not a compliment.” Women are supposed to walk through the world thinking that they are ugly, purchasing products that are sold to them to make them feel better about themselves, but ultimately, find inner peace through the validation of a man. This is a basic trope of the patriarchy that surfaces everywhere from advertising to pop music. The chart-topping hit 2011 song by boy band One Direction, “What Makes You Beautiful,” exemplifies this notion perfectly in its chorus: “You don’t know you’re beautiful / That’s what makes you beautiful.”<sup>106</sup> This man believes he has gone above and beyond in being a “woke”<sup>107</sup> ally. He has looked past the façade bestowed on Drunk Argumentative Sam by her patriarchal oppression, saying that in fact she just doesn’t need all that stuff. What he fails to recognize—and what Drunk Argumentative Sam so clearly articulates at him—is that he continues to objectify her through this so-called compliment. Not only does he make a likely unsolicited comment

---

<sup>105</sup> VICE Staff, “NEW YORK - WHAT A NOISE SHOW IS LIKE.”

<sup>106</sup> “One Direction Lyrics - What Makes You Beautiful.”

<sup>107</sup> “Woke” is a contemporary term for someone who is attuned to social injustices and structural oppression—things like institutionalized sexism, racism, classism, ableism, etc. Furthermore, it is someone who makes a point of standing against those structures.

about her appearance, he undermines her agency to decide whether or not she would like to wear makeup. Simply put, “that’s not a compliment.” Drunk Argumentative Sam refuses the ideas that men know what is best for women, that they should speak for women, and that they have the right to comment on women’s bodies and lives more generally.

The entirety of the text in this meme seems to build to the final line: “You’re not a feminist you literally live with a rapist.” This text is the biggest in terms of font size; it is at the logical visual conclusion of the meme (the bottom); and it appears to be the most overtly serious of the critiques. This line expounds on what has been not-so-subtly implied through the rest of the text—that this man who Drunk Argumentative Sam is taking to task has two major characteristics: 1) he thinks he is a feminist and 2) he is not a real feminist.

Though this final accusation may seem to be the most severe, probably because it includes the merciless word “rapist,” it really is just a further articulation of what has already been said throughout the meme. This man looks down upon pop culture artifacts he views as feminized, celebrity gossip and astrology, which indicates a lack of respect for the things that interest some women. Additionally, it demonstrates an ideological system that structures the world in terms of binaries of acceptability: women like celebrity gossip, that means men cannot. This man makes women he is interested in sit through his performance of taking up space, in a scene that is on record as being exclusive and hostile to women. This man objectifies women through false woke praise and allyship, undermining their agency and personal choice. Everything about this meme makes way for this climax, and so the climax comes as no surprise. Men who do not respect women, men who are fake feminists, have no trouble at all making excuses for their friends who have done terrible things to women. Sexual violence exists on a continuum, not a binary of not rape and rape. Everything that

Drunk Argumentative Sam calls out is a form of violence, however subtle. Each of these criticisms engages with some form of cover for toxic masculinity. Through its font, image, and textual choices, this meme draws countless threads from popular culture and contemporary everyday politics together into one unified image.

### “Not gonna be your slutty therapist!”

I conducted an informal poll, asking my peers what came to mind when they heard the term “slutty therapist.” They had no idea what I was talking about, and skillfully ping ponged the question back to me. Once I showed them @binchcity’s however, they



Figure 4.6: Meme by @binchcity.

immediately recognized the situation (Figure 4.6). The caption of the post reads: “this is the most important meme I ever made and I use it as a reference point all the time.” The meme shows a stock photo of a white woman—a therapist—in a black suit, carefully eyeing her patient over the bridge of her glasses.

In her hands: a pencil and notepad. The man on her therapist couch is gently smiling, his fingers laced and resting on his stomach, eyes turned up towards the sky. The meme is structured like an advertisement, with rhetorical questions peppering the top half of the image: “need someone to listen to your sob stories? feel like draining a woman of all her

emotional energy? do you have both a superiority AND an inferiority complex? what about a fragile ego that constantly demands to be fed? seems like you want a...” Then in large, bold, capitalized font: “SLUTTY THERAPIST.” To the left of the woman pictured, an italicized definition is enclosed in a black box: “slut-ty ther-a-pist. *a smart, accomplished woman who for some reason got roped into your mess of a life and is now acting as your pseudo-girlfriend and full time therapist all while you refuse to recognize that your indecisive, erratic, and quasi-meninist behavior is definitely grounded in your patriarchal ideas about women.*” Beneath the bolded word “therapist,” the meme reads in italics, “*“Not gonna be your slutty therapist!”*”<sup>108</sup>

This meme demonstrates a strong fissure between visual top and bottom, cultivating a muddled sense of intended audience and tone. The words in the top half of the meme take on a tenor of cheesy advertising, while the bottom emulates the style of an intellectualized dictionary definition. The meme seems to be verbally directed at a male audience with the advertising language. The second person “you” here addresses the needs of an imagined male viewer, who would theoretically be interested in the product of Slutty Therapist. That being said, the material is really only relatable to the female audience. Inherent in a man’s desire for the Slutty Therapist is that he has no self-awareness. The man who creates the Slutty Therapist role out of a woman in his life would never self-identify with this meme. This dissonance between the verbalized and implied intended audiences creates greater irony within the meme.

The difference in direction of messaging between men and women indicates a stratification of presumed mental capacity (or desire) to engage with the notion of the Slutty

---

<sup>108</sup> “@binchcity on Instagram.”

Therapist. The advertising language indicates that men can only relate to or understand the Slutty Therapist when looking at it through the lens of their own quite personal experience. This connects to the broader trend in the current sociopolitical climate of people with privilege refusing to acknowledge it. Many men on the Internet have no qualms in believing that their successes in life have nothing to do with larger systems of oppression, and in fact, feel angry when people suggest otherwise.<sup>109</sup>

In contrast, the dictionary definition seems to be directed at the woman viewers of the meme. This is underscored by the fact that the suggested usage, ““Not gonna be your slutty therapist!”” could really only ever be used by a woman. The creator of the meme also reiterates this in the caption: “I use it as a reference point all the time.” Embedded in this style choice seems to be a sociological inclination—a desire to identify a common practice and coin a term to denote it. This ability to consider private troubles as inherently part of public issues<sup>110</sup> is crucial for women to connect to a collective consciousness. This kind of collective consciousness raising is part of the work of memes, and @binchcity continues doing so through empowering women to use their sociological imaginations.

The use of advertising tone here also demonstrates how men construct women’s emotional labor as commoditized goods. This can be extrapolated up to the scale of patriarchy in a larger sense. The visual entry point of the meme calls to mind a bad infomercial or pornographic film, emphasizing the transactional nature of the relationship before one even engages with the text. The use of the word therapist here connects the Slutty Therapist to her professional counterpart, situating the concept within the labor market. The

---

<sup>109</sup> See: Incel communities on reddit, the comment section on anything posted by a woman, etc.

<sup>110</sup> Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*.

relationship with the licensed therapist is strictly professional—she is trained, has knowingly opted in to this dynamic, and is compensated for her time and labor. What @binchcity describes here is a man entering into a relationship with a woman under the pretense that it will be a real, interactive dynamic. Then, he shifts it to being solely transactional. The Slutty Therapist has one glaring distinction from the therapist—her labor is unpaid.

The deployment of women's free labor in this meme situates it within the larger contemporary mainstream political movement towards equal pay. Much like the social problems of male entitlement and sexual violence, this is an issue that has been operating in society for the duration, expanded with a breath of energy in the current moment. Articles from popular women's magazines *Harper's Bazaar* and *RedBook* detailing the constant pressures of emotional labor for both married<sup>111</sup> and single<sup>112</sup> women went viral in 2017. Incredibly famous actresses and public personalities have spoken out about the unequal pay landscape in Hollywood, calling for change.<sup>113</sup> Rectifying the imbalances of emotional labor and unequal pay are popularly accessible issues, in the forefront of the public imagination. @binchcity's meme adds a voice to the larger conversations about unpaid emotional labor and male entitlement.

### **Spongebob, Squidward, and the Sexual Moment**

*Spongebob Squarepants* is the longest running cartoon on the children's television network, Nickelodeon. The show chronicles the goofy underwater adventures of Spongebob Squarepants, an obtuse and optimistic sea sponge, and his friends. His next-door neighbor

---

<sup>111</sup> Hartley, "Women Aren't Nags—We're Just Fed Up."

<sup>112</sup> Andrea Bartz, "I'm a Single Woman and I'm Fed Up With Emotional Labor, Too."

<sup>113</sup> "19 Female Celebrities Who Have Spoken Out About Hollywood's Wage Gap | PEOPLE.Com."



and coworker is a grumpy, highbrow cephalopod named Squidward Tentacles. Where Spongebob likes to go jellyfishing (something like underwater butterfly catching, with required frolicking), Squidward likes to paint and practice his clarinet. Squidward is the constantly irritated voice of reason to Spongebob's happy-go-lucky unawareness. In a meme by @ghosted1996, we find Squidward tucked into bed, a panicked expression on his face. His eyes are open wide, with wrinkles above and bags below. His long nose is squished against the pillow, his mouth in a despondent downturn. Behind Squidward, out the window, Spongebob is in the midst of dancing, wearing an absurd top hat. His expression is happily distant: the lights are on, but nobody is home. On Squidward's head, white plaintext says, "me lying awake in torment." Above Spongebob, in the background, the same white font reads, "the thought of all the men out there who think they're better than they are when they really ain't shit because I fake came"

out there who think they're better than they are when they really ain't shit because I fake came"

(Figure 4.7). In the caption of the meme, @ghosted1996 writes, "never do this again people #never."<sup>114</sup>

The particular image of Spongebob in this meme is a larger trend within the meme community. The screenshot



Figure 4.7: Meme by @ghosted1996.

<sup>114</sup> "@ghosted1996 on Instagram."

comes from an episode of the show in which Spongebob and Squidward go on a long-winded adventure to deliver a pizza. Spongebob shows Squidward “how the pioneers hitchhiked,” doing a ridiculous dance while Squidward reluctantly plays the spoons. During Spongebob’s dance, the subtitles of the episode read, “(spoons rattling).”<sup>115</sup> This meme is commonly used for a practice called “shitposting.” A “shitpost” is a post that takes little to no effort to make, is possibly confusing, and thought to be categorically unfunny. However, it is a useful form of expression, and the “(spoons rattling)” meme is a popular tool for visual articulation.

In cropping the “(spoons rattling)” Spongebob into her new image that foregrounds Squidward, @ghosted1996 renders intertextuality visible. She also adds a layer of legibility to her imagined audience. The meme does not simply suggest that she expects her viewers to have some knowledge of the television show *Spongebob Squarepants*. It further implies that they are consumers of memes more generally, and therefore able to read the “(spoons rattling)” Spongebob as a particularly absurd iteration.

The “(spoons rattling)” Spongebob is particularly salient in his absurdity when put in contrast with the correlate to the memer herself, Squidward. The language is unclear as to whether Spongebob is meant to represent the presence of the thought itself taunting the memer, or an imagined behavior of the memer themselves taunting her. Either way, using the “(spoons rattling)” Spongebob character lends a specific preposterousness to the actor who is now out of her control. His character, both in the images represented and the television show more generally, casts Squidward as a total wet blanket. Squidward as a character is closely linked in perceptions of his behavior with the broader political character of the feminist killjoy. Where men get to play and act out and do essentially whatever they want, the

---

<sup>115</sup> “Spoons Rattling.”

feminist killjoy is here to suck the fun out of everything by pointing out the faults in the behavior. Spongebob and Squidward have this exact dynamic—Squidward is never really wrong in critiquing the idiotic antics that Spongebob gets up to, but the show depicts him as a kind of villain. When feminists critique the irresponsible or dangerous behaviors of men, they are usually not wrong that those things are problems. Nonetheless, the feminist killjoy is a social villain who looms large. The tone of @ghosted1996's self-alignment with Squidward, when put in context with the text, reads as a tongue-in-cheek reclamation of the feminist killjoy character.

The notion of “fake coming,” or pretending to have an orgasm while having sex, is a practice typically done by women in sexual encounters with men. With pop culture discussions abundant,<sup>116</sup> as one sexuality scholar says, “fake orgasm has many practitioners but few champions.”<sup>117</sup> There has been some clinical psychological research on why women choose to fake orgasms, producing the “Faking Orgasm Scale” or FOI. According to this study, women fake orgasms for four major reasons:

- (1) Altruistic Deceit, faking orgasm out of concern for a partner's feelings;
- (2) Fear and Insecurity, faking orgasm to avoid negative emotions associated with the sexual experience;
- (3) Elevated Arousal, a woman's attempt to increase her own arousal through faking orgasm; and
- (4) Sexual Adjournment, faking orgasm to end sex.<sup>118</sup>

Studies vary across the board in terms of how many women have faked an orgasm (once or regularly), but suffice it to say that the percentage is high. This is a common practice.

---

<sup>116</sup> See especially: Rob Reiner's 1989 film *When Harry Met Sally*.

<sup>117</sup> Jagose, *Orgasmology*. P. 518.

<sup>118</sup> Cooper, Fenigstein, and Fauber, “The Faking Orgasm Scale for Women.” P. 423.

Historically, feminists have reviled the fake orgasm as a total failure on the part of women. In her article “Love Me, Love My Ombre, Elle,” post-colonial feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak places the fake orgasm in context with the trope of women to be deceptive and manipulative. She argues that through faking orgasm, individual women confirm stereotypes about their gender at large. The fake orgasm allows the patriarchy to continue forcing women into subservience, and individual women should stop faking it.

In the wake of #MeToo and Time’s Up, though, the fake orgasm takes on significance that is less hostile to the women who use it. It would be a particular challenge to argue that faking orgasm, or the implicit pressure to fake orgasm, is a form of sexual assault. That is not the point here. That being said, the fact that so many women do fake orgasms indicates a larger culture around heterosexual encounters. Our social environment has conditions in which consent—the most baseline level of sexual respect and interpersonal awareness—is very easily thrown by the wayside. It reasonably follows that contemporary heterosexual encounters are inherently not designed for women to be successful in experiencing pleasure.

We see this way of thinking about the fake orgasm operating in @ghosted1996’s meme. The mood is not that she has let the entire gender down by being “deceptive,” it is that she has let herself down in individually empowering a man who did not deserve it. In her construction of the fake orgasm, the men on the receiving end of her faking it have no idea that they had been bamboozled. They operate in the world as a carefree, particularly spacey Spongebob, passing no greater judgments on womankind. The problem is not in painting women a certain way, but in allowing men to have inflated egos. Again, this kind of critique functionally integrates with #MeToo and Time’s Up. The collective straight male ego is so

out of control that individual men feel entitled to whatever they so desire, including women's bodies.

### **Conclusion**

Within the current political opportunity structure informed by Time's Up and #MeToo, these memes gain political valence through audience readings. While the artists do not identify the works as politics, they deploy imagery and language in their memes that signal relevance to the current political climate. Just as the tent became the symbol of the Occupy Wall Street movement, these memes can be read as political iconography, appropriated into varied political readings in their circulation. They fit within the larger social justice initiatives of #MeToo, Time's Up, adding crucial voices to the conversation. The viewer can exercise political agency in reading their own experience on top of the material provided by the memer. Again, the personal becomes political in a manner that is humorous, emotional, and virtually tangible.

## *CONCLUSION*

Memes are abundant and generative sites for investigation. In defining feminism as inextricably linked with politics, we can understand memes as deeply political objects. The actions performed by their creators are forms of feminist resistance: shameless expression, coalition building, and consciousness raising. Memes have strong roots in the pre-digital art historical canon, as I demonstrated through the protomeme. Contemporary memers draw inspiration and emulate the style trends and accessible art models of their feminist foremothers. In demonstrations of everyday feminist politics, they deploy culture jamming strategies to draw attention to the inequalities thrust upon them and their peers. In a more academic feminist sense, memers perform intergenerational coalition building through citing the legendary women they look up to. Memes are a technology that inherently breeds community. Interactivity is built in to the language of memes. The technology enables a sense of imagined community that has tangible positive consequences. Finally, memes scale up and out, giving marginalized voices a platform to contribute to a broader sociopolitical conversation.

Memes are still a relatively uncharted field for research. It is my humble hope that this project makes a compelling case for further inquiry. Chapter Two postures memes as feminist art. I would be delighted for future scholars to flesh out the notion of the protomeme. There is much more to uncover about the ancestry of memes, I have only just scratched the surface here. In the contemporary moment, scholarship on how memes operate within the in-person art world would be fascinating. Also, the technology of art circulation will surely evolve quite rapidly in the coming years, and tracking how memes play a role in that progress is an interesting avenue. Chapter Three explores memes as spaces where

community can flourish. There is certainly much more empirical evidence to be collected here. What are the motivations of the people viewing, liking, and commenting on the memes? Do they feel as invested in meme communities as the memers do? There is so much untapped data that lies in the consumers of memes. Chapter Four engages memes as political objects as assisted by their surrounding structures of political opportunity. There must be countless ways that sociology of politics and social movement theory could provide interesting insights on memes. Particularly in the context of a United States President who is bombastic and erratic on social media, memes and political theory have lots to learn from each other. Finally, the fact there is a collective reticence on the part of memers to engage the label of “political” is certainly cause for further investigation. What sociological factors contribute to such distaste? What can this tell us about the contemporary iteration of feminism?

Memes are an essentially democratized technology. Through extremely simple and virtually free materials, people anywhere in the world can articulate their feelings through artwork, upload an image to the Internet, and connect with others. In the contemporary moment, wherein the political opportunity is present for the advancement of gender equality, memes play an important role in narrativizing the struggle.

The field of Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies is born out of activism, out of a hope to remedy the chronic erasure of marginalized voices from the academy. While, as protomemes illustrate, there are works to be reclaimed from the past, memes represent the voices of the current moment. Through memes, so many people with marginalized identities, social positionings, and backgrounds can not just access a global conversation, but contribute to it using their own voices. Social media provides the infrastructure for civil rights

movements such as #MeToo and Time's Up to reach an expansive audience. Memes are part of the (digital) on-the-ground push of these movements. They enable people virtually everywhere to access and circulate feminist theory, to seek and give support in communities, and to mobilize their voices politically. We must continue to study memes because they provide insight into not just the times from which they come, but also the individual experiences of the people living in them.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- “19 Female Celebrities Who Have Spoken Out About Hollywood’s Wage Gap | PEOPLE.Com.” Accessed May 4, 2018. <http://people.com/celebrity/female-celebs-who-have-spoken-out-about-equal-pay/>.
- Anderson, Benedict R. O’G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.
- Anderson, Jacqueline S., and Sharmila Pixy Ferris. “Gender Stereotyping and the Jersey Shore: A Content Analysis.” *KOME* 4, no. 1 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.17646/KOME.2016.11>.
- Andrea Bartz. “I’m a Single Woman and I’m Fed Up With Emotional Labor, Too.” Redbook, October 13, 2017. <https://www.redbookmag.com/life/friends-family/a52582/single-women-emotional-labor/>.
- Babcock, Gregory. “A Field Guide to the Modern Day Fuccboi.” Complex. Accessed May 8, 2018. <http://www.complex.com/style/2015/03/fuccboi-guide>.
- Baxandall, Michael. *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*. 2nd ed. Oxford Paperbacks. Oxford [Oxfordshire] ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Becker, Howard Saul. *Art Worlds*. 25th anniversary ed., updated and expanded, [Nachdr.]. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2011.
- Berman, Jillian. “Women’s Unpaid Work Is the Backbone of the American Economy.” MarketWatch. Accessed May 4, 2018. <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/this-is-how-much-more-unpaid-work-women-do-than-men-2017-03-07>.
- @binchcity. “Toxic Masculinity Meme - Google Search.” Accessed May 2, 2018. [https://www.google.com/search?q=toxic+masculinity+meme&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=cfSEsIfNSAY7jM%253A%252CDhBI7g2JGW9TGM%252C\\_&usg=\\_\\_sHKcUFTfLGzhztNWpOsMPWg4ejE%3D&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiTontTiefaAhXvmeAKHQQTdAooQ9QEIMTAD#imgsrc=cfSEsIfNSAY7jM:](https://www.google.com/search?q=toxic+masculinity+meme&tbm=isch&source=iu&ictx=1&fir=cfSEsIfNSAY7jM%253A%252CDhBI7g2JGW9TGM%252C_&usg=__sHKcUFTfLGzhztNWpOsMPWg4ejE%3D&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewiTontTiefaAhXvmeAKHQQTdAooQ9QEIMTAD#imgsrc=cfSEsIfNSAY7jM:)
- “@binchcity Instagram: ‘This Is the Most Important Meme I Ever Made and I Use It as a Reference Point All the Time.’” Instagram. Accessed May 3, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BYomqRKhfq/>.
- “Brooklyn Museum: Artemisia Gentileschi.” Accessed May 7, 2018. [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/place\\_settings/artemisia\\_gentileschi](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/place_settings/artemisia_gentileschi).
- Bucknell, Alice. “What Memes Owe to Art History - Artsy.” Artsy, May 30, 2017. <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-memes-owe-art-history>.
- Camara, Esperança. “Gentileschi, Judith Slaying Holofernes.” Khan Academy. Accessed May 7, 2018. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/monarchy-enlightenment/baroque-art1/baroque-italy/a/gentileschi-judith-slaying-holofernes>.
- Carpenter, Julia. “The Unpaid Work That Always Falls to Women.” CNNMoney, February 21, 2018. <http://money.cnn.com/2018/02/21/pf/women-unpaid-work/index.html>.
- “@chingonachronicles • Instagram Photos and Videos.” Accessed May 4, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/chingonachronicles/>.
- Christiansen, Keith. *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*, 2001. <http://archive.org/details/OrazioandArtemisiaGentileschi>.
- “CHRONOLOGY.” Guerrilla Girls. Accessed May 7, 2018. <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/chronology/>.

- “Confessions\_interview.” Guerrilla Girls. Accessed May 7, 2018.  
[https://www.guerrillagirls.com/confessions\\_interview/](https://www.guerrillagirls.com/confessions_interview/).
- “Confused Nick Young.” Know Your Meme. Accessed May 7, 2018.  
<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/confused-nick-young>.
- Cooper, Erin B., Allan Fenigstein, and Robert L. Fauber. “The Faking Orgasm Scale for Women: Psychometric Properties.” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 43, no. 3 (April 2014): 423–35.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-013-0212-z>.
- Crossley, Alison Dahl. *Finding Feminism: Millennial Activists and the Unfinished Gender Revolution*. New York: New York University Press, 2017.
- “Culture Jamming with Six Dollar Coffee.” Accessed May 7, 2018.  
<https://sites.psu.edu/comm411spring2015/2015/02/17/culture-jamming/>.
- DeLaure, Marilyn, and Moritz Fink, eds. *Culture Jamming: Activism and the Art of Cultural Resistance*. New York: New York University Press, 2017.
- Edwards, Stephanie Zacharek, Eliana Dockterman, Haley Sweetland. “TIME Person of the Year 2017: The Silence Breakers.” Time. Accessed May 2, 2018. <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/>.
- “@esoteric\_queen on Instagram: ‘Lmao Life Mood.’” Instagram. Accessed May 8, 2018.  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/BgBJ\\_W2gphn/](https://www.instagram.com/p/BgBJ_W2gphn/).
- “@ghosted1996 • Instagram Photos and Videos.” Accessed May 7, 2018.  
<https://www.instagram.com/ghosted1996/>.
- “@ghosted1996 Instagram: ‘Never Do This Again People #never.’” Instagram. Accessed May 3, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BYsLGOhFeJE/>.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Nachdr. Anchor Books. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1990.
- “Goldnosing ☐☐ on Instagram: ‘Technically, It’s Always after Labor Day ☐ so Be Fashion Forward and Leave White Supremacy in the Past ☐.’” Instagram. Accessed May 8, 2018.  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BYoODucBVLo/>.
- Griswold, Wendy. *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre, 1576-1980*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- “Guerrilla Girls Archive (Getty Research Institute).” Accessed May 7, 2018.  
[http://www.getty.edu/research/special\\_collections/notable/guerrilla\\_girls.html](http://www.getty.edu/research/special_collections/notable/guerrilla_girls.html).
- Guerrilla Girls (Group of artists), ed. *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls: By the Guerrilla Girls (Whoever They Really Are) ; with an Essay by Whitney Chadwick*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1995.
- Hartley, Gemma. “Women Aren’t Nags—We’re Just Fed Up.” Harper’s BAZAAR, September 27, 2017. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a12063822/emotional-labor-gender-equality/>.
- Highfield, Tim. *Social Media and Everyday Politics*. Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2016.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. Routledge Classics. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. 1st ed. Toronto, Ont., Canada: Between the Lines, 1989.
- . *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- . “Theory as Liberatory Practice.” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4, no. 1 (1991): 13.

- Jaffe, Jenny. "Broad City Recap: Witchy Business." *Vulture*, October 25, 2017.  
<http://www.vulture.com/2017/10/broad-city-recap-season-4-episode-6.html>.
- Jagose, Annamarie. *Orgasmology*. Duke University Press, 2012.  
<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822397526>.
- Kamer, Foster. "Barbara Kruger Responds to Supreme's Lawsuit: 'A Ridiculous Clusterf\*\*k of Totally Uncool Jokers.'" *Complex*, May 2, 2013.  
<http://www.complex.com/style/2013/05/barbara-kruger-responds-to-supremes-lawsuit-a-ridiculous-clusterfk-of-totally-uncool-jokers>.
- Kristeva, Julia, and Toril Moi. *The Kristeva Reader*. Repr. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.
- "Long Seen As Victim, 17th Century Italian Painter Emerges As Feminist Icon." NPR.org. Accessed May 7, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/12/12/504821139/long-seen-as-victim-17th-century-italian-painter-emerges-as-feminist-icon>.
- "@manicpixiememequeen on Instagram: '& Even Some New Toxic Behaviors Lol.'" Instagram. Accessed May 8, 2018. [https://www.instagram.com/p/Bgic8w1lm\\_z/](https://www.instagram.com/p/Bgic8w1lm_z/).
- McAdam, Doug. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- McGarrigle, Lia. "Sexism In Streetwear: Why Is It Letting the Whole Scene Down." Highsnobiety, May 2, 2018. <https://www.highsnobiety.com/2017/08/14/womens-streetwear-sexism/>.
- Merrim, Stephanie, ed. *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*. Latin American Literature and Culture Series. Detroit, Mich: Wayne State Univ. Pr, 1999.
- "#MeToo and Time's Up Founders Explain the Difference Between the 2 Movements." Time. Accessed May 8, 2018. <http://time.com/5189945/whats-the-difference-between-the-metoo-and-times-up-movements/>.
- Meyer, David S. "Protest and Political Opportunities." *Annual Review of Sociology* 30, no. 1 (July 13, 2004): 125–45. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.30.012703.110545>.
- Mills, C. Wright. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- "MoMA | Yoko Ono. Cut Piece. 1964." Accessed May 7, 2018.  
[https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/yoko-ono-cut-piece-1964](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/yoko-ono-cut-piece-1964).
- Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. 2nd ed. Language, Discourse, Society. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire [England] ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Nazif, Perwana. "Barbara Kruger." *Coeval*. Accessed May 2, 2018. <https://www.coeval-magazine.com/coeval/barbara-kruger>.
- Needham, Anuradha Dingwaney, and Carol Maier, eds. *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts*. Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995.
- Nembhard, Candice. "Supreme Box Logo History: Here's Everything You Need to Know." Highsnobiety, May 2, 2018. <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/supreme-box-logo-history/>.
- News. "Mind the 'Curiosity Gap': How Can Upworthy Be 'Noble' and Right When Its Clickbait Headlines Feel so Wrong?" *National Post* (blog), May 23, 2014.  
<http://nationalpost.com/news/mind-the-curiosity-gap-how-can-upworthy-be-noble-and-right-when-its-clickbait-headlines-feel-so-wrong>.
- "NFS8-FemFuture-Online-Revolution-Report-April-15-2013.Pdf." Accessed May 7, 2018.  
<http://bcrw.barnard.edu/wp-content/nfs/reports/NFS8-FemFuture-Online-Revolution-Report-April-15-2013.pdf>.

- “One Direction Lyrics - What Makes You Beautiful.” Accessed May 2, 2018.  
<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/onedirection/whatmakesyoubeautiful.html>.
- “OUR STORY.” Guerrilla Girls. Accessed May 7, 2018. <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/our-story/>.
- Princess Nokia. *BRUJAS - PRINCESS NOKIA*. Accessed May 4, 2018.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUcAPCxrSQs>.
- Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*. MIT Press Essential Knowledge. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014.
- Sollée, Kristen J., and Coz Conover. *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive*. Berkeley: ThreeL Media, 2017.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Love Me, Love My Ombre, Elle.” *Diacritics* 14, no. 4 (1984): 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.2307/465049>.
- “Spoons Rattling.” Know Your Meme. Accessed May 3, 2018.  
<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/spoons-rattling>.
- Staff, VICE. “NEW YORK - WHAT A NOISE SHOW IS LIKE.” Vice, March 16, 2009.  
[https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/wdz4n9/new-york-what-a-noise-show-is-like](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/wdz4n9/new-york-what-a-noise-show-is-like).
- “Supreme Logo, Supreme Symbol, Meaning, History and Evolution.” Accessed May 4, 2018.  
<http://1000logos.net/supreme-logo/>.
- Tate. ““Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?”, Guerrilla Girls, 1989.” Tate. Accessed May 7, 2018. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-p78793>.
- . ““Guerrilla Girls’ Identities Exposed!”, Guerrilla Girls, 1990.” Tate. Accessed May 7, 2018. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-guerrilla-girls-identities-exposed-p78816>.
- “TechCrunch Posts Lies, Refuses to Apologise | Technovia.” Accessed May 7, 2018.  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20090226202006/http://www.technovia.co.uk/2009/02/techcrunch-irresponsible-journalism.html>.
- “@textbook\_virgo on Instagram: ‘Drunk Argumentative Sam Is a Big Mood.’” Instagram. Accessed May 2, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BSoe9Wtj9eg/>.
- “@thatanxiouswitch • Instagram Photos and Videos.” Accessed May 4, 2018.  
<https://www.instagram.com/thatanxiouswitch/>.
- “The Fourth Wave of Feminism: Meet the Rebel Women | World News | The Guardian.” Accessed May 7, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/10/fourth-wave-feminism-rebel-women>.
- “The Greatest Fashion Memes Of 2017 | British Vogue.” Accessed May 7, 2018.  
<http://www.vogue.co.uk/article/greatest-fashion-memes-of-2017>.
- “The Progress of Love: Love Pursuing a Dove.” Accessed May 6, 2018.  
<https://collections.frick.org/objects/167/the-progress-of-love-love-pursuing-a-dove;jsessionid=CD8FDF0EB7EFD90FFC9F067D4366E050>.
- Tucker, Robert C., Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, eds. *The Marx-Engels Reader*. 2d ed. New York: Norton, 1978.
- “U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: UNITED STATES.” Accessed May 7, 2018.  
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/newyorkcitynewyork,US/POP010210#viewtop>.
- Wallick, Scott Allan. “Mark Dery › *Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs*.” Accessed May 15, 2018. [http://markdery.com/?page\\_id=154](http://markdery.com/?page_id=154).

Weingarten, Zuzana Boehmová, Elizabeth. “Unpaid Labor Is Hilarious—if You Think About It.”  
Slate Magazine, March 8, 2018. <https://slate.com/human-interest/2018/03/unpaid-labor-is-hilarious.html>.

Westfall, Tessa. Interview with @binchcity. FaceTime, October 19, 2017.

———. Interview with @bunnymemes. FaceBook Video Chat, October 6, 2017.

———. Interview with @dyingbutfine. Google Hangout, October 22, 2017.

———. Interview with @fiona\_apple\_butter. FaceTime, October 13, 2017.

———. Interview with @kinayamemes, November 9, 2017.

———. Interview with @queerprayingmantis. FaceBook Video Chat, October 26, 2017.

———. Interview with @sensuallmemes. In-Person, September 19, 2017.

———. Interview with @thatanxiouswitch. Skype Call, October 21, 2017.